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# Kokoro Connect Volume 1

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These are novel illustrations that were included in  
Hito Random.

庵田定夏

Sadanatsu Anda

KOKORO-CONNECT HITO-RANDOM



ココロコネクト ヒトランダム

庵田定夏

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# 庵田定夏

Sadanatsu Anda

一九八八年生まれ大阪出身。

第11回えんため大賞特別賞受賞。大学三回生の「自分の人生どうしようか」と悩んでいた時期に同賞を受賞したため、尚更人生の方向性に迷うことになってしまった。……って書くと、まるで賞を取れたことがあんまり嬉しくないみたいに見えますけど、もちろん全然そんなことはないです。大変感謝しております、はい。

# 白身魚

Shiromizakana

繊細かつ柔らかな絵柄で知られる実力派イラストレーター。「14歳」「少年少女」というキーワードにひたすら弱く、

小説では「カラフル」「アーモンド入りチヨコレートのワルツ」、実写では「花とアリス」などが好き。冬になると猫二匹がお腹の上で眠るため寝返りがうてなくてちょっと困る今日この頃。

ココロコネクト ヒトランダム

庵田定夏

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KOKORO-CONNECT HITO-RANDOM



やえがし いち  
八重樫太一

「オレと唯が入れ替わってたんだ、マンガみてーに……だつ!?」

ああきよしふみ  
青木義文

「フリの割に  
ボケが面白くない」



ながせいおり  
永瀬伊織

いなばひめこ  
稻葉姫子

きりやまゆい  
桐山唯

1  
日目

二人のテンションは、これでもかというくらいアゲアゲ状態であつた。  
しかし、それは余りにも、迂闊だった。  
扉の開く音が、した。

16日目



数秒の空白は必然であつた。  
そしてその空白を見逃すほど、文化研究部の女子陣の二人は甘くない。





ハリボテで誤魔化し続け、  
気づいたら元の形を失ってしまった永瀬の世界。  
ぼろぼろと脆く崩れかかってもきていたその世界に、  
今回の『人格入れ替わり』という名の巨大地震は、  
余りにも大き過ぎたようだ。

考えろ。  
自分が今、永瀬のためにできることは——。

「誰もわたしをわたしと気づいてくれなくなつて……  
わたし自身にもわからなくなつて……  
そんな……そんな風にして、  
わたしはこの世から消えてしまふんじやないかなっ」



17  
日目

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## Chapter 1 : By the Time We Realized It, It Had Already Begun.

September is the month when most Japanese high school students return to their normal lives after their exotic summer vacations.

Yamaboshi High School is situated in an appointed, ordinance-designated city<sup>[1]</sup>. The school is well-known for its carefree learning environment and the students maintain relatively good grades. Here, students are basically starting to settle down and return to their lessons. Nevertheless, in Yamaboshi High School, there is a cultural festival that is held annually at the beginning of September. Consequently, the school is always embraced in an overwhelming and elated atmosphere by the end of the cultural festival.

In the midst of September, the atmosphere in the school fades away and is replaced by a calm, yet boisterous, commonplace school life.

Yaegashi Taichi was one of those people who were living this commonplace school life. And that was how it should have been.

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After going through all of his six lessons without even falling asleep, he had to finish the restroom duties with his team. Then, he headed towards his clubroom.

He got out from his classroom, Class 1C in the East Building. He passed through the North Building, then entered the Recreational Building. The four-storey Recreational Building was predicted to collapse if repair work was further delayed. His destination was its fourth floor. Of course, there were no lifts in the Recreational Building, so he had to climb up the stairs to reach the top

.

Taichi had to get to this "undesired" location (high school students didn't really care for beautiful scenery or good lighting. Most preferred to not climb stairs.) because he belonged to a club that had been established this year; there were only five club members that made up this small club.

The club was called the Cultural Research Club, or CRC, which studied the cultures of countries around the world day after day...or not.

A bit winded after climbing the stairs, Taichi looked at the words "Cultural Research Club" printed on an A4-sized piece of paper, and headed into Room 401.

The wind blew from the open windows, gently brushing Taichi's cheeks and swaying his hair. On the fourth floor, the ventilation was very good. It felt very cozy during this season.

There was already a club member in the room.

Two long tables were placed in the centre of the room. The Cultural Research Club's vice-president, Inaba Himeko, was sitting at the corner of a table, operating her own laptop computer.

"Oh, Inaba. The others aren't here yet?"

"See for yourself."

Inaba, not even checking Taichi's face, replied in a relatively low but feminine voice.

Taichi sat on the folding chair and positioned himself towards Inaba. Only then did Inaba finally lift her head to look at Taichi.

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As if shining in the darkness, her shoulder-length, straight black hair seemed to be meticulously cared for. Lustrous, gleaming and supple, her fine dark hair would probably match with a kimono. Adorning those slender yet large eyes, her unusually long eyelashes gave her a mysterious sacrosanct aura.

Her mature appearance conveyed the impression that she was different from most other senior students. Along with her detached aura, it was easy to believe that she was a person hard to get along with.

"Taichi, have you gathered everything necessary for the next issue of the *CR News*?"

"Yup. I just need to sort through some of the remaining data and we're good. By the way, the topic is 'Looking at the Professional Wrestling via the History of the Brainbuster'. When you mention 'brainbuster' in Japan, people always think that it's done from the back, but it was originally by slamming them from the head—"

"Shut up."

"Eh? Aren't you the one who asked me first?"

"I asked you whether you have gathered everything necessary, so your answer should only be either 'yes' or 'no'. I didn't ask you about anything else. Actually, it's because I don't want to hear about it."

"You're as blunt as ever. I think you should speak with euphemisms... actually, I'm *begging* you to speak with euphemisms."

After Taichi sat down, his eyes were level with Inaba's. Considering that Taichi was a bit taller than the average first-year, could it be that Inaba was taller than the other girls when seated? No. It was simply because Inaba was sitting incredibly straight. With her back so straight, the others couldn't help but wonder if there was a device propping her back up. Along with that, Inaba's legs were pretty slender and long. In fact, she was pretty tall compared to most high-school girls. 'Slim and slender' were very apt adjectives to describe her with.

The door shuddered as it was violently flung open, and a lively voice reverberated inside:

"What's up! Sorry I'm late."

Shining of glee, a smiling face brought forth some warm wind and light into the room. It was just that

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person standing there smiling. Notwithstanding, it brought the feeling that the flower-and-blossom blooming of spring had arrived.

"Hmm? Is it only Taichi and Inaba today?"

The one slightly tilting her head while murmuring was the Cultural Research Club's president, Nagase Iori.

Taichi, Inaba and Nagase were all classmates in Class 1C.

"Aw man, I even ran over here today — what a waste of energy."

Nagase complained while leaping onto the torn black sofa inside the room. She raised her arm and rested her head on it, just like what ageing men who watch TV during the holidays were doing. Although she bolted up the stairs just a while ago, her breathing seemed very calm and peaceful.

"Nagase, your pants are going to be completely exposed if you let your skirt ride up like that."

Inaba looked at Inori, calmly pointing out the problem.

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"Who cares?"

Nagase showed a prodigious amount of her artistically white and slender legs while speaking. Despite what Inaba had mentioned, she didn't seem to care what others gazed at. She even slapped her thigh, making "pat, pat" sounds.

"I'm here too, you know."

This time, Taichi spoke.

"120 yen a peek."

"I have to pay?! Well, that price sounds pretty reasonable ..."

"Taichi, even if you didn't mean anything wrong, you do realise that considering the age of the person you're speaking to, these words sound quite illicit, don't you? You should stop it right here."

Inaba responded with a snippy reply.

Nagase giggled like a child who successfully pulled a prank, and sat back down on the sofa.

Nagase has big, brilliant eyes with double eyelids, a straight-bridged nose, and a slightly oval but impeccable face that didn't have any trace of make-up. In spite of this , her fair and permeable skin was supple. Her thin, smooth hair, which was as fine as silk and didn't seem to have any substance applied on it, slightly fell towards her shoulders-- it was just flatly tied behind her head. Although Nagase didn't use make-up, her hair emphasized her pure cuteness. This idiosyncratic trait made others feel that her staying natural to herself made her more beautiful.

"Oh yeah. Nagase, what are we doing for our next issue?"

Taichi asked.

"Hmm...Actually, I was just thinking about what the *CR News* lacks."

"Then...?"

"My conclusion is, because Inaba is responsible for the scandals, I can be assured that this suggestion will be taken. What we are lacking are violence and sex."

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"Who will look for that kind of stuff in a newspaper?!"  
In fact, we're straying from what a newspaper is just by having negative articles."

In the last issue of the *CR News*, Inaba exposed two teachers having a relationship between colleagues (source unknown). Consequently, during this year's Cultural Festival, the club that people would've ignored had the chance to squeeze in other diverse activities, and became the talk of the town. Amongst the festival's buzzing atmosphere, the two teachers later even proposed at the night festival.

To sum it up, the atmosphere then was very energised. Including other teachers, everyone was stirring up a congratulatory atmosphere towards the two teachers. Although it was said to be a wonderful ending, there was too much tension when having a relationship in front of everyone. It would be impossible to imagine how embarrassing it would be if they broke up. This aspect was very worrisome in Yamaboshi High School.

"Well, that article was exclusive to the school festival, so I don't plan to write something like that at this moment. Besides, I hate to expose information that I have

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acquired. What I did at that time was on a sudden impulse."

Inaba Himeko's hobby was collecting information and analysing it. (Though she hated to make it public.)

Where would she have used all that information? This question stirred up my curiosity.

"Alright, let's use that impulsiveness and challenge ourselves by writing an erotic article!"

Nagase said, giving a thumbs-up.

"Don't try to pressure a pure first year girl into writing erotic articles."

Inaba replied, though her face showed no sign of timidity resembling that of a pure first year girl.

"Don't worry, I'll be in charge for this one! So if Inaba would let me take a few high-tension erotic photos, then.."  
."

"Like hell I would! Why should I provide you with materials that boys would use to deal with their sexual desires!?"

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"Inaba's idea of 'the limits to erotic contents that can be approved to be published in a school magazine' makes me curious...",

Regardless of whether Inaba could hear him or not, Taichi continued to murmur to himself.

Based on her tone, it seems that her imagination was quite sexual, enough for others to rebuke her idea that she was a pure first year girl.

"Besides, Nagase, you look prettier than I do. It would be more suitable to take photos of you instead."

Inaba concluded, looking as if she had been in deep thought.

"No way. That's because I am an idol type who cannot strip because it's my cuteness that gives me an advantage . So if you want something really erotic, Inaba would be best."

"These two people... they're honestly considering stripping."

It seemed like Nagase looked like she didn't perk herself up because she didn't really care much about her

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appearance. However, she was actually analysing her own advantage. It felt like not using make-up was just one of her many tactics to 'become more noticeable'.

The correct answer, however, might be that she hadn't even thought about it.

"I can't say I don't understand... But hold on, why do we need an erotic appeal? I don't think that high school boys ask for that much. By common sense, refreshing types would be more popular."

Inaba spoke.

"Nope, considering high schoolers nowadays, mature and erotic kinds of people should be surprisingly more popular... according to my instincts."

"According to your instincts, huh?"

Taichi made a sharp-tongued reply to Nagase in a low voice.

Then the two girls turned their head at Taichi.

"Speaking of which, don't we have a high school boy right here? What kind of girl do you prefer, Taichi?"

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Inaba asked.

"Yeah, if you were to choose, who would you rather see strip? Inaba or me?"

Nagase's question was completely off the track.

Anyway, I have to give an answer, right? With this in mind, Taichi closed his eyes and pondered for a few seconds. Then he replied.

"Well, if I were to speak on behalf of every boy in this school, I would say something like 'you should both strip'..."

Just after he spoke those words, Nagase chipped in.

"3:55 p.m. Yaegashi Taichi told two girls in the CRC to strip... Did you get all of that, Inaba?"

"Of course, we'll put it in this issue's editorial."

Inaba smiled wickedly while typing.

"Umm... Well I *did* say that, so I can't really refute it."

No matter how hard he tried, Taichi couldn't outwit them with words. He sorrowfully drooped his head, re-acknowledging the balance of power in the club.

After that, Nagase started to read manga, while Inaba faced the computer and Taichi prepared for tomorrow's lessons. The three continued in a relaxed manner for the next 30 minutes. Today was the day where the five club members had agreed to get together for discussion; however, two members had not yet come.

"Speaking of which, Aoki seemed a bit weird when we were having PE today..."

Taichi suddenly stopped his pen, only murmuring to himself without expecting a reply. Even though Aoki was in a class different from Taichi's, he would be together with Taichi during PE because PE lessons were conducted with two classes together.

Inaba commented with a thoughtful gaze:

"Yui wasn't acting like herself during gym class today either."

"Is that so... maybe something happened? You think Aoki finally hooked up with her?"

"Impossible. Looking at the situation at hand, even if Aoki spent a lifetime trying, they wouldn't be in a relationship. Only if Aoki becomes aware of the things he's left out would there then be a chance."

Just as Taichi and Nagase began talking about the two that were absent, the door squeaked lightly as it was pushed open.

The two missing club members, Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriyma Yui, staggered into the room from the entrance.

Aoki's hair was somewhat long and curled. He always had an adorable (if negative that is light-hearted ) smile. He gave the impression that he was lazy but easy to talk to (this, the same, if negative, is frivolous). He was also tall and thin, having the figure of a literature teenager.

Kiriyma's hair, depending on the light shining on her, usually had a pretty, bright chestnut hue. Her hair was also supple and lustrous; her erect eyelashes were tilted slightly upwards and her eyes were really stern. Although she had a small figure, her figure was not of a

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child, and it was obvious that she had been exercising. This was because she had a flexible and firm body. Overall, she was a lively character.

The two's personalities really went well together, as both were normally quite cheerful.

For no apparent reason, however, they didn't seem to have any vitality today. Their appearances were completely weak.

Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba sat on one side of the table while Aoki and Kiriyama sat on the opposite.

"So... Um... What happened to you two?"

Nagase commenced the inquiries in this indescribably heavy atmosphere.

"Eh... I am planning to say this alright, but how do I put this..."

Aoki scratched his hair, as he hesitantly began speaking. Although he normally wore his uniform deliberately messily, it looked particularly dishevelled today.

Beside him, Kiriyma hung her head and looked at the corner of the table while meaninglessly fidgeting with her hair.

"What's with you two? If there are any problems, you should tell us. We can help you to some extent!"

Taichi urged them to speak.

"Oh, that's relieving... Hmm! Ok! Then we'll start! Although the two of us have decided to tell you now, it is quite a difficult thing to try and explain. So it will take a lot of confidence to really tell you about this—"

"Tell us!"

Inaba interrupted him in a sharp voice.

Aoki was a bit frightened. He nodded and replied, "Yes, yes!" No matter what the opponent's status was, Inaba never showed any mercy.

Aoki deeply inhaled and sought confirmation from Kiriyma's face. Although Kiriyma looked quite reluctant about the matter, she still nodded to show consent. After confirming, Aoki recommenced his speech

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"Actually last night we..."

Everyone held their breath. The whole room was silent . Aoki kept them in suspense, and allowed that silence to spread through the room. Then...

"Our souls were exchanged!"

He shouted.

"What?"

Inaba spoke.

"Eh?"

Taichi spoke.

"Hahahaha.... ah?"

Nagase spoke.

There were three simultaneous responses. To sum it up, they all expressed surprise.

"Like I said, Yui and I switched our souls, as if in a manga... Ouch!"

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"Ohoh, straight strike to the head with a hand chop."

Taichi was quite impressed with the accuracy and sharpness of Inaba's strike.

"What did you do that for, Inaba?!"

"It's sad how you are so into it, but this joke is totally boring."

"That's not it! I am not kidding. I am very serious!"

"Compared to leaving a dead silence after joking when everyone was in anticipation, being assaulted by Inaba is much more dramatic."

Taichi said in a low voice.

"Besides, if your souls were really exchanged, right now Aoki should really be Yui? However you speak, your words always sound dumb. Also, your block-headedness hasn't changed much."

"That's why I described the 'exchange' in past tense. We've returned to normal now! Also, Iori, don't be so blunt! Didn't school teach you that verbal violence without constraint is the most dangerous?"

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After that, Aoki, with an indescribable exaggerated pose, endeavoured to persuade others that 'Kiriyama and he did exchange souls'. Although that endeavouring spirit did spread out, what he said was too absurd. Taichi and the others only felt puzzled.

"Right, I understand what you mean... Jeez! Then what does Yui have to say? Aoki said his soul was with you."

Inaba inquired to Kiriyama, who had not yet spoken but had a troubled face.

Yui held her head and looked downwards. She shook her head as if she couldn't accept the truth. When her usually combed, bright chestnut hair had degenerated into a mess, she decided to open her long-closed lips.

"... Of course that's not true. How can something like this happen in reality? Isn't this very strange? For Aoki to become me, and me to become Aoki... Yeah, there's no way!" As she spoke, her voice crescendoed, and then she violently stood up and declared:

"That was just a nightmare!"

Kiriyama posed in a fighting stance that could almost be dubbed with a 'Pong' sound.

"I don't believe in supernatural things that can't be explained with science! Yup, that's what I've decided. So stop dragging me into your crazy fantasies, Aoki! Soul exchange? Occult things like that are so yesterday."

"I, I've been betrayed! Didn't we confirm this together just now?"

"I was just confused! My level of judgement was zero back then!"

"Even though I don't really understand, I think that's a cool way to turn hostile."

Taichi still spoke even though he thought it was unnecessary.

"Are you saying that it was only a dream?"

"That's right! It was just more realistic than usual! Come on, Aoki, you should wake up already!"

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Yui's face turned a bit strange, as if she was entering anger mode.

"... Then what you mean is, we had the same dream, and we felt the 'soul exchange' within the same time frame, and even though we haven't been in each other's rooms, we could see the room of one another perfectly, and when I switched to Yui, the things I moved in her room were also coincidentally moved in the real world?"

"That's just what happens when coincidence upon coincidence are stacked together! Yeah, in other words, it's a miracle!"

"So you're saying that it's a miracle that caused our souls to be exchanged—"

"Why does it have to be Aoki and me!"

Yui roared as if she was going to die.

"Yeah, is it so? Should we call it destiny or fate? So I say, we should go along with the will of the world. Ah~~"

"How did you jump to those conclusions?"

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Taichi gave a sharp-tongued reply even though those involved didn't hear him.

"Eeeerrrrghh! It's because you say these things that I hate you so much!"

Kiriyama trembled fiercely while returning back to the corner of the room.

"So what actually happened to you two? If it's strange fantasies or illusions, I can still hear your story."

Inaba murmured such words that sounded utterly strange.

"There's no need for that, Inaba! That's because the souls of Aoki and I have never exchanged! If I had exchanged with Iori then that would have been fine. But if it's Aoki, I will never confess! Firm refute! Complete refusal! Denied! There's no chance it happened!"

"That pervert wants to force his disgusting fantasies on me!" Kiriyama cried, while jumping on Nagase. Nagase, as if stroking a bothered dog, stroked Kiriyama's back, and said, "Clever, clever, don't cry."

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"Eh? The reason for her not confessing is because she wants to target me...?"

Aoki dropped his shoulders like he was deeply shocked. Taichi told him not to take it too seriously. Although it is not like something could have really happened, Aoki's dismal state was clear to Taichi.

Anyway, Aoki and Kiriyama continued their 'souls were and weren't exchanged yesterday' squabbling.

Just when Taichi and Nagase tried to take this opportunity to try to casually ask 'Did they eat something bad?', Inaba finally spoke out violently.

"Anyway, everyone go and cool off for a while. Club dismissed!"

Because of the vice-president's call, the regular club meeting was decided to be delayed until tomorrow.

## Chapter 2 : 'That' Was Started from 'th'

In order to hold the delayed club meeting, the Cultural Research Club members hurried to the clubroom. Of course, Taichi was one of these members.

The five club members sat around the rectangular table. Although an embarrassed atmosphere could still be felt from Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriyama Yui today, at least they were obedient and kept silent.

Taichi hadn't yet touched on yesterday's matter because it felt like it had become quite sensitive. The atmosphere was rather stiff in room 401 of the recreation building.

Vice-president Inaba Himeko paid no attention to the terrible atmosphere and decided to start the meeting.

"Geez! Let's start our club meeting! First—"

"Ah! I left something in the classroom."

The president, Nagase Iori, suddenly interrupted the procedures.

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"Hmm! Just when I extraordinarily want to seriously hold a meeting you pour cold water on me!"

Inaba was getting exasperated.

"Inaba-chan, calm down, get a hold of yourself ~ "

"You know you are the cause of this, don't you?"

"Then, Inaba-chan, can I go get that now?"

An innocent childish smile was drawn on Iori's face . Her hair, bundled behind her head, looked like it was hopping and jumping... Of course, this couldn't possibly have happened.

"Get those kinds of things later... No, forget it. Go get it ... fast."

"Yes, sir ~ "

"I'm not a sir... She's not listening, is she."

Without waiting for Inaba to finish, Nagase had already rushed out of the clubroom.

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"Haha, even Inaba can't handle Nagase."

For the first time since she got in the clubroom, a relieved Kiriyama spoke.

"Although it's not to the point that I can't really handle her... still, it might be intractable."

Inaba sighed.

The atmosphere seemed to have cooled down.

With this, Aoki returned to his normal state and started to joke around pointlessly. Kiriyama and Taichi responded with sharp-tongued replies.

The clubroom was returning to its normal condition.

"...It felt as if that girl did that because she felt the mood, which is why I think it's intractable."

At the very moment Inaba's low voice reached Taichi's ear...

—The world turned pitch black.

When he regained his senses, the world had become horizontal.

...Nope, it's because I am lying horizontal myself - Taichi immediately thought of a really obvious answer.

He wasn't on the chair he was sitting on just a while ago. Moreover, his face was stuck firmly on a table.

Taichi got up and looked around.

A classroom.

Not the clubroom.

No one here. Shouts from some club practising came from the court. There were also batting sounds.

Taichi felt a bit dizzy. He held onto the table to keep his body steady. His view wasn't quite coordinated... Is it because of the dizziness? No, it seemed there was a more significant reason behind this.

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I should be in the clubroom on the fourth floor of the recreation building right now. And I am sure because up until now, I was talking with Inaba and the others. But somehow, for no reason, I am now in the classroom.

Did something happen?

To grasp the situation, Taichi looked around the classroom again.

The way the tables were organised, the posters on the board, the contacts written on the corner of the blackboard, and the little bookshelf on the edge of the classroom—everything was familiar to Taichi.

This was Taichi's class: 1C.

If he had come from the clubroom, no matter how hard he tried, he would at the very least need a few minutes.

Taichi trembled slightly; he felt something bad was going to happen.

Is it that I teleported to the classroom from the clubroom instantaneously? Or is it that I walked to the

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classroom myself, but for some reason , my memory has faded? Or is it that my time in the clubroom was only a dream and I was just having a nap in the classroom all along? Or could it be... something else?

"So which is it actually... eh?"

That was too impulsive.

Taichi was so shocked that his whole body trembled while he held his hand beside his mouth.

"...You're kidding."

As he spoke in a low voice, he moved his hand to his neck.

He couldn't even feel the prominence of his Adam's apple in his neck. His neck was as smooth as that of a girl

.

I must have misheard. Taichi tried in his heart to reject the voice that came from his mouth. Although he tried to, he couldn't. His rational side told him he didn't mishear.

"Why did my voice become as smooth as a girl's?"

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## Is this a dream?

No, this couldn't possibly be... this feeling and texture could not be that of a dream, but reality.

Calm down. Taichi repeated these two words in his head. He tried to control his fantasies from wandering off in strange directions. No matter how hard he tried, though, his fantasies were still impossible to control or stop.

Aoki's words from yesterday flashed through his mind

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In any case, not confirming it would not get him anywhere. So Taichi inhaled deeply and, after exhaling, slowly looked down to his feet.

From his waist to his knee, there was a cloth, cylindrical in shape. Looking objectively, this resembled a piece of clothing that females would wear... in other words, it was a skirt.

Then, at the bottom of the skirt, he could see a hint of the white and slender thighs. Looking further down revealed a pair of soft legs covered with black knee socks

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"Arghh—!" Taichi cried. But it was not Taichi's voice... Or should we say that this voice was now Taichi's?

Taichi drooped his head and used his hands to pull at the 'thing' covering his upper body for confirmation.

Undoubtedly, that was Yamaboshi High School's uniform. The only thing was... it was the female uniform.

Taichi was very confused.

He couldn't grasp his present condition, situation and plight.

No, more accurately, 'it wouldn't be that'. Such a conclusion brought along an overwhelming existence that floated in his mind. Even so, a consciousness long developed in human manners was continuing to boil in his mind and trying to veil his sudden conclusion.

Reality, however, brutally forced itself upon Taichi's eyes.

If he were a man, he being Taichi, then that would never exist... that object, which had appeared in front of Taichi at the very start.

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Taichi's chest had expanded.

That degree couldn't possibly be due to inflammation. No matter how strong a force his chest was subjected to, this kind of expansion was obviously not the kind that a boy's pectoral muscles would undergo.

Undoubtedly, this should originally belong to a woman, this is, 'that' which started from 'th'.

If this was the real thing, he had to acknowledge that "this is what happened".

Taichi nervously swallowed his saliva in an effort to calm himself down.

Then he finally decided to hold his hands in front of his chest and used his right hand to grasp the right hill and his left hand to grasp the left hill. Then he started rubbing them.

Rub, rub, rub, rub...

Even though it was so supple, as if it were about to melt, it was quite firm and elastic at the same time. It was

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as though it was slipping out between his fingers but at the same time it absolutely wouldn't. This was an indescribable and amazing sensation.

This in fact was an unknown experience. Although Taichi hadn't touched the real thing in his sixteen years of life, he believed it wholeheartedly.

—This must be the real thing, 'that' that started from 'th'.

And every time he rubbed 'that' from 'th', he could feel that sensation. In other words, this was not simply a decoration stuck on his body—just as Taichi started to think like this...

A \*click\* came from the classroom door. The door opened. A girl entered the classroom and her eyes met Taichi's.

Taichi's condition had already made him dizzy to the point where he could not respond to this unexpected new development.

Walking stiffly with the same pose was a person who held her silky hair behind her, and wore a trademark pair of glasses—Fujishima Maiko, class president of class 1C.

Staring at each other silently for a few seconds, Fujishima started to speak slowly.

"I am...that...I saw that the classroom windows were open, so I returned to close them. That's because the weather forecast said that it might rain tonight...Then, [Nagase-san], what...are you doing?

—Fujishima called Taichi [Nagase].

He should be Yaegashi Taichi and not [Nagase], but is he now [Nagase Iori]?

"If I were to tell you what I saw, you looked like you were rubbing your own breasts..."

Having been told this by Fujishima, Taichi then realized he was still clenching his breasts with his hands. He hurriedly unclenched of his hands. Although he felt that his brain couldn't operate because of insufficient storage, he still understood how bad the situation was.

---

"..."

"..."

Fujishima eyed Taichi and widened her pupils behind her glasses to have a good look at Taichi. Taichi couldn't escape. He could only stand rigidly.

Deep silence spread through the room.

But Fujishima quickly dispersed it with an unpredictable question.

"Do you want me to help you to rub them?"

"...Eh?"

What development was this?

"Rather than doing it yourself, wouldn't it be better for someone else to rub it for you? On multiple levels."

"No, no need."

Although the part 'on multiple levels' was quite interesting, Taichi still rejected the offer.

---

"You don't have to hold back. I have some confidence when it comes to this."

Fujishima stepped forward.

"Fuji, Fujishima?"

Fujishima seemed to have been turned on by a miraculous switch.

The class president, who was normally a model student, had an erotic expression on her face for the first time, which caused Taichi to be uncertain about what to do.

Fujishima gradually approached Taichi.



Maybe this was crisis of virginity? In this situation, however, who was the owner of the virginity... No, these things weren't worth thinking about right now. Taichi began to panic.

"You, you should first calm down, Fujishima! If we calm down and talk, we could understand each other correctly!"

"Yeah, so let us talk... using our bodies!"

"Bo...Bodies? Wa...Wait!"

Actually, what really happened that resulted in this situation?

Taichi couldn't grasp the force that caused this.

Now another person rushed into the classroom with surprising momentum.

"Tai—Chi!"

Breathing heavily and screaming was the person—[Yaegashi Taichi]... No wait, it should be "someone with the body of Yaegashi Taichi", right?

---

Taichi used his still-puzzled mind to predict any possibilities.

Fujishima called Taichi as [Nagase]... Then, if not neglecting those supernatural phenomena, thinking logically, the person now moving and entering the classroom in [Taichi's body] should be Nagase?

"Yae, [Yaegashi-kun]?"

Suddenly rushing in, [Taichi] caught Fujishima in a tight corner.

"Fujishima-san! If you need to talk to Taichi... No, that's me... no, need to talk to [Nagase Iori], then sorry! Because of emergency situations , I need to take her away ! Ok. Now come with me!"

The person now moving as [Taichi], who was most likely [Nagase], came beside Taichi and pulled his hand, planning to bring him outside.

At this moment, Fujishima grabbed Taichi's other hand

"Wha... What's the matter, [Yaegashi Taichi]? Don't you see we are doing something important now?"

---

"Right, something serious almost happened! Let me go , Fujishima! I have to go!"

Taichi [Nagase] said.

"Look, that's even what Taichi... Nope, that's even what [Nagase] is saying!"

Nagase [Taichi] said.

"Why do the tones you guys are using seem so weird? Anyway, if you want to take Nagase-san away, give me a good reason!"

Fujishima still showed a sign of rejection.

"Hmm, then have a taste of this!"

Nagase [Taichi] jumped on Fujishima as she cried.

"Tickle, Tickle, Tickle..."

"Eh, ah, stop it...! My abdomen can't take it... Hahaha. And [Yaegashi Taichi], what you are doing now is sex- sexual harassment... Ahahaha, stop, stop please..."

---

Class 1C's classroom sunk into sharp cries from hell.



"So, what kind of prank are you trying to pull this time?"

Inaba eyed Taichi and the others with cold eyes.

[Taichi] and [Nagase], having returned to the clubroom, immediately confirmed their statuses together. Although they screamed at their faces in the mirror during the process and were caught in a mess, they had now already calmed down.

According to Nagase, she was in the classroom when she suddenly blacked out. Then, when she got back on her feet, she was in the clubroom facing Inaba and the others. By the way, according to those who witnessed the situation (Inaba and the others), [Taichi's body], which was originally sitting, suddenly fell forwards as though losing consciousness, then bent up again at the next instant.

---

Then Nagase temporarily went into a flurry; however, she remembered Aoki's words from yesterday and thought, "Isn't this a similar situation?". With that in mind, she flew to the classroom where [Nagase] was... this should have been what had happened up until now.

"Ah... rather than souls, it seems more like our personalities were exchanged!"

Ahaha... Nagase [Taichi] spoke in an unbelievably swift tone and laughed cheerfully.

"Tai, Taichi having such a refreshing smile is kind of rare... His laughs normally are quite twisted."

Kiriyama, surprised, blinked as she spoke in a low voice.

"Yes. In fact, his appearance isn't bad. If he smiled like that all the time, he'd be loved by many girls!"

Aoki also chimed in with them.

"Is my smile really that bad...? I think I'm just smiling normally..."

---

"...Those things don't really matter! Don't change the subject!"

A "Pong" could be heard as Inaba struck the table with her fist.

"—Ouch..."

"That strike just then must have really hurt?"

"Taichi, would you please..."

Inaba planned to strike a deathblow at Taichi [Nagase]

"Stop talking..."

But just before hitting him, she turned her body over and let her sweeping side punch<sup>[2]</sup> deviate from its path towards Taichi. Posing like a ballet dancer, she held out her hands and remained still on her feet. Her face continued to twitch, either because of her shame or her anger.

"Inaba looks quite happy!"

Nagase [Taichi] ferociously struck a deathblow.

"I think this is just what happened—Inaba was attacked by Taichi's skilled unwanted sharp-tongued responses and wanted to strike back at Taichi with a physical attack as usual, but after seeing that he's now Nagase... she stopped herself midway."

"Inaba was even criticised by a guy like Aoki, how sad.  
.."

Aoki and Kiriyama passed the baton and described Inaba dismally.

Inaba's face twitched, but she still kept a good pose, as if deep breathing autonomously.

"This is the first time I've seen such an interesting Inaba!"

Taichi [Nagase] poured words from his heart. Inaba eyed Taichi sharply.

"...You wait and see, Tai..."

Just when she spoke, Inaba rolled her eyes and became silent.

---

Nagase [Taichi], as though waiting for this moment, smiled wickedly.

"Inaba, you just turned to [Nagase] and called her Taichi, right?"

Nagase Iori was perhaps the only person who can repel Inaba in the club.

"Hmm—"

Inaba had a bitter expression.

"That's because... You two have such strange acting skills..."

"Do you think Taichi can act like me, Nagase Iori, so well?"

Nagase, having the [appearance of Taichi], stormed towards Inaba. Her voice and appearance were of that of [Taichi]; however, her actions and way of speech belonged to Nagase.

"Inaba, you probably won't believe this... even I don't quite believe it, but you've got to trust me! I am Taichi, and this [Taichi] over here is Nagase."

---

Despite being uncomfortable and uncoordinated with his high pitch, Taichi [Nagase] still pleaded his case.

After biting on her nail, Inaba asked the others.

"How do Yui and Aoki see this? Yesterday you two...  
Nope, it was only Aoki, argued that something like soul exchange occurred?"

"Yeah, Taichi and Nagase must have exchanged their souls. This is a talk of experience ! Does Yui agree with me?"

"Hmm... Looks like... I can only admit it really happened..."

"I thought you denied that strongly yesterday?"

Inaba complained.

"Because that was an awful experience!"

Kiriyama clapped her hands on the table with a "Pong" while rising, causing her chestnut hair to flutter vibrantly

"Oh. So that means Yui admits she exchanged her soul with mine yesterday night, right?"

Although she was being asked with a playful smile, Kiriyma expressed her extreme disgust, but still replied lightly with a "Yeah..." and nodded her assent.

"That's because... if I were to say that was a dream, it would really be strange, and Nagase and Taichi have said that they have exchanged too..."

"Hey... are you guys for real? Soul exchanging happens in fairy tales, not in reality..."

It was understandable that Inaba couldn't believe it; after all, this 'phenomenon of soul exchange' wasn't believable with just words.

However strange and contrary to common sense and knowledge some things were, to those who have been accidentally touched by them, they can, surprisingly, easily accept it as the truth.

Even if it were logically impossible, once you've experienced it, even the impossible will become mundane.

---

Inaba looked at the countenance of the four members. They were all nodding their assent.

"So you guys accept this so easily...? Can't you at least freak out or something?"

"Ayah... once you're part of it, you will feel that 'ah, eh ? Yeah!'"

"Nagase, you didn't explain it at all."

Taichi [Nagase] responded with a sharp-tongued reply

"I, I am starting to feel a headache coming... but if we continue like this, this will never be settled... Let me confirm this again, you two are not kidding, Nagase and Taichi exchanged their souls for real... or may I say exchanged their personalities?"

"That's why I am Taichi despite appearing to be [ Nagase]."

"This shows that you, having [the body of Nagase], should know only what Taichi knows; and you, having [ the body of Taichi], should know only what Nagase knows, right?"

---

She suggested, wanting to identify them from what they knew.

"This really is the easiest way. Any question is fine. Ask me, and I will be glad to reply... Although, wouldn't it be too hard to find something that Inaba and I know but Nagase doesn't...?"

Nevertheless, Inaba didn't quite care about Taichi's dilemma. She confidently waved her hand and said,

"Ah, don't worry about that."

"Alright, from now you should reply to my questions. I'll only believe you if you reply immediately."

Inaba got up and leaned close to Taichi. Despite his heart pounding due to her inconceivable sexual charm, Taichi [Nagase] still firmly endured her scrutiny.

"Come on!"

"You have to reply in a few milliseconds."

"Ok. I know."

"Alright, then let's start!"

---

Inaba deeply inhaled...

She quickly asked the question in one breath!

"What's the name of the latest AV<sup>[3]</sup> Aoki lent you?"

"'Big Boobs Girl High...' Wait, what are you trying to get me to say! And Inaba, you don't even know the answer yourself!"

Taichi [Nagase], who had almost accidentally thrown out the AV name, began to panic.

"Ohoh! It is quite rare to see Taichi speak so loudly and then get flustered... But first, putting that aside, how did Inaba know of our trade?"

"That doesn't matter. Also, Aoki'll help verify the answer. So, Taichi, the answer is...?"

Although Inaba seemed serious, you could see a bit of pleasure and joy somewhere deep in her eyes.

Taichi glanced at Kiriyma and Nagase [Taichi] and examined their faces. Kiriyma looked at Taichi with a blazing red face. And Nagase mumbled, "Big Boobs ah..."

---

while looking at Taichi with the whites of her eyes.  
Along with Nagase having the [appearance of Taichi],  
Taichi was on pins and needles.

"Then, Inaba-san, could you cut me some slack and let  
me whisper the answer to Aoki?"

After being silent for a while, Inaba lifted her chin  
towards Aoki.

Relieved, Taichi [Nagase] quickly moved to Aoki and  
told him the answer in case Inaba changed her mind.

"How's the answer, Aoki?"

"Completely correct, captain Inaba! Also, hearing those  
perverted words from [Nagase] is quite lucky!"

Aoki's stupid speech made Nagase [Taichi] think, "Eh?  
What is this? I feel I just lost something important .  
Should I ask him for compensation?" and had a feeling of  
insecurity.

"Then, now that we know we have two big breast  
fetish idiots in our club, let's test the person who has [  
Taichi's appearance] to see if she's Nagase."

---

"Would it be that Inaba, while confirming whether our answers are correct, is actually trying to get revenge for teasing her?"

The appalling fright caused Taichi [Nagase] to groan with a shudder.

"Must abstain from antagonising Inaba..."

Kiriyama looked as if she had become even more frightened of Inaba.

Inaba stood up, walked to Nagase [Taichi], and whispered something in her ears. Then...

"Poof! \*Cough...cough\*, Wait... Ina, Inaba-san, is that true?"

"True."

Inaba said distinctly.

"Why will... You don't have to say such things now."

Nagase [Taichi] covered her eyes with her hand while slipping under the chair. She looked like she had been whispered to with some impulsive content.

---

"But... we truly are grown-ups now, right...\*Sob\*"

What did she say that made her like this? This was really curious.

Inaba returned to her seat without turning a hair. She then released all her tension, then looked up and gazed at the ceiling, mumbling,

"Personality exchange... I believe it."

Ohoh... The other four members celebrated Inaba's compromise.

"Even if it were an act, between the possibility of Taichi making such diverse expressions and the possibility of personality exchange, after thinking about this carefully, the latter seems more likely."

"How should I respond to that opinion... And also, why are those three people nodding with an obvious 'Oh, so this is what happened' look on their faces...'

Taichi really wanted to ask them about what they thought of him.

---

"I understand the personality exchange between Nagase and Taichi... Alright, assume I understand... So, what will you two decide to do from now on?"

Although a bit late, Inaba pinpointed the most vital problem.

"Hmm... Ha... ~ What to do?"

Nagase [Taichi] smirked.

"Why do you seem so free today..."

Inaba also felt surprised.

"Before that, let me hear from Aoki and Kiriyama about their exchange. You eventually switched back later on, right?"

"Yeah... How can I put it? It should've been sometime around 3 a.m. at night? When I was sleeping in my bedroom, I suddenly woke up and felt a bit insecure. Then I looked around the room and found out that I was in a room I had never seen before. Though I was frightened when I was confirming the situation, it was a pleasant surprise when I saw Kiriyama in the mirror! 'Ah

...' This made me even more confused; however, I changed back to myself and returned to my bed when I wasn't paying attention. That was the kind of feeling I had. Did Yui have a similar feeling as well?"

"Yeah, similar, but the difference is, I thought it was a nightmare when I saw myself in the mirror so I was cowering on the bed. Really, I didn't even care if it was my own bed or not. Also, after I returned to my own room... Nope, after I returned to [my body], I found a big mess in my room."

Kiriyama looked at Aoki with disdain.

"Ab...About that, I am really regretful."

Aoki apologised.

"Oh... how long was your exchange?"

Nagase [Taichi] asked Aoki.

"I think it was no more than an hour. About thirty to forty minutes?"

---

"Only about thirty to forty minutes... how strange, though of course the phenomenon itself is already really strange..."

Inaba frowned.

"So does it really have to do with time? Or is it affected by something else—"

Before ending his question, Taichi's vision and consciousness was suddenly stopped as if being unplugged.

"—Oi! Are you okay?"

With such loud voices rampantly swirling in his mind, Taichi frowned and reopened his eyes. The dark had suddenly vanished, and the usual view of the club re-entered his eyes... Nope, not right.

Until just now, Inaba should have been in front of him and on the right. Now she was in front. Aoki and Kiriymama's seats had also changed. And [Nagase] now had 'the appearance of Nagase' and was staring at him.

This meant that...

---

" "We're back to normal!" "

Taichi cried simultaneously with Nagase, whose countenance suddenly brightened up.

"Is this for real..."

Inaba murmured while slipping off from her seat.

In the end, that day's meeting still ended with vice-president Inaba's order: "This personality exchange phenomenon is temporarily confidential and should not be told to anyone."

## Chapter 3 - That Guy Who Was Interested

After arriving at school in the morning, Yaegashi Taichi didn't pass through the classroom, but headed straight to the clubroom on the fourth floor of the recreation building. This was because on the way to school, he received a message from Kiriyama: "After arriving to school, head to the clubroom immediately! (mandatory)".

After all, it would be strange if he had a sense of pleasure after that incident when he exchanged his personality with Nagase.

Just after entering the room, he discovered Nagase Iori, with confused and unfocused eyes, lying on the sofa. The usual overwhelming aura that she spread seemed to have been veiled. He was unsure whether it was because she was too tired or something else, but it just felt like the very existence of Nagase was illusory.

"Good morning. You are Nagase, right?"

Taichi greeted her with a type of question he would normally never ask.

"Morning, Taichi! Taichi is Taichi... right?"

---

It was a strange conversation.

The other club members arrived at the clubroom around a minute later.

"Morning, Ao..."

Nagase held her words.

That's because Aoki seemed to fall like an anaemic patient when he entered the clubroom.

It seemed just like a replay of the scene from the day before yesterday.

"Are you ok...?"

Taichi asked with a shudder.

"Ok... fine... How can I be fine?!"

Of course, Aoki (removing his unusual tired expression) looked like a frivolous, tall and thin literature teenager; however, his tone-

"Are you... Yui? How can it be!"

Nagase intentionally asked in a bright voice.

Three days ago, Kiriyama Yui said she exchanged with Aoki.

Is it 'soul exchange' again?

"Yeah! I am Kiriyama Yui! Ahah, I've had enough of this... I can't stand this anymore..."

Kiriyama Yui [Aoki] was shivering passionately.

No matter how she shouted "I am Kiriyama Yui", since she had the appearance of [Aoki], it was really hard to see her as Kiriyama. It just felt like [Aoki] intentionally speaking like a ladyboy. Nevertheless, her sense of urgency showed that she was by no means joking.

"Please calm down, Kiriyama, we know that you exchanged with Aoki."

It is unknown whether it was because she ran out of patience or because of something else entirely, but Taichi's consolation was useless and Kiriyama's [Aoki's] emotions exploded suddenly.

---

"What the heck! Why should it be Aoki? Why must I exchange into this [non-cute body]? Why can't I exchange with Iori?"

"What she complains about is a bit strange..."

Actually, it was... very strange.

"Morning~~"

The slack greeting tone of the person coming in froze the three club members.

"Arghh, holding such meetings so early, looks like my luck isn't very good today... Hmm? What? What's wrong? Why the long face guys?"

Speaking sloppily in a low feminine voice was [Inaba Himeko]. That is, a speaking style belonging to [Aoki] that was unheard of from Inaba, until now.

\*Pong\*! The last member boomed in with her shoulders shivering while breathing heavily.

After swallowing her saliva, that person with the [appearance of Kiriyama] shouted.

---

"What you said was true...! I, I have become [Yui] !"

"This-"

Taichi lifted his head.

"Set-up-"

Nagase continued.

"Can happen too..."

Taichi ended the sentence.

Seeing the perils of Kiriyama's personality entering [Aoki's body], Aoki's personality entering [Inaba's body] and Inaba's personality entering [Kiriyama's body], the whole Cultural Research Club decided to skip the first lesson together.



That afternoon, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were called to the staff room.

The teacher knew that the five club members in the Cultural Research Club skipped the first two lessons and had only come in when the third lesson started.

"Hmm... How do I put it, it's that... Although I don't think it's necessary, I still have to keep my reputation, so let me interrogate you guys while I have my lunch... it's soba, you know, soba, it will soften if it's left too long."

The physics teacher of class 1C, Gotou Ryuusen (Go for short), let the three students stand around him, and excitedly peeled off the cling film on the lunch box that was delivered from the cafeteria.

"My tummy is also starving..."

Standing next to Taichi, Nagase muttered.

"After all you guys are usually quite serious, so I do care about what happened... Ahha! \*Cough, Cough\*... Ah ~ I choked. Anyway, when you are eating hot stuff, you would choke on the first bite, right? Eh? You guys don't?"

---

"Please ask your question now, Gotou."

"Inaba, let me repeat myself. Because I hope to be a casual and friendly teacher, I permit students to call me 'Go'; however, I don't quite remember permitting anyone to call me by my name directly."

Gotou was as he had said, and treated students friendly and thus was quite popular among students. He was just around 25 and had similar tastes with the students, so that must've helped.

"Only after you can actually do what you should be doing, then you can continue with your blabber! I wonder who did all the accounting work for the last cultural festival, Gotou?"

"Ah, thanks for all your help, Inaba-san, hahaha... oh and if you could, please don't mention that in front of the other teachers."

Although his attitude was quite friendly, he really is problematic as a teacher.

Gotou slurped up a noodle and drank some soup while leaving the noodle in his mouth.

---

Nagase's tummy squeaked cutely. Taichi side-eyed her, only to see her playfully sticking her tongue out, though he was unsure if it was to cover her shyness. Her actions were extremely cute; really, no one could withstand her cuteness.

"Then, what do I have to say... Ah, right, what did you guys do while skipping the lessons? Aoki and Kiriyama said they also skipped the first two lessons and returned on the third... all of you are Cultural Research Club members. So, as the CRC advisor, this is an acute situation! Right, I will first speak these knowledgeable words that should be spoken by a teacher."

Gotou was also the Cultural Research Club advisor. In fact, he created the club this year.

"The reason isn't that big of a deal. Yesterday, the five of us ate some chocolate bread that had gone bad and we were late today due to stomach pains... that's about it."

Inaba replied distinctly in a formal tone. By the way, she ordered Taichi and Nagase to keep silent and abstain from saying anything ridiculous.

---

"Will I get the same answer from Aoki and Kiriyama?  
It seems they are being asked by Hirata(teacher) from  
class 1A."

"Of course."



The Cultural Research Club members had already reached a consensus on this point.

"Hmmm..."

Gotou, still chewing his soba, lifted his vision towards the air as if thinking about something.

"Anyway, there is nothing to prove that this is a fraud, and you've said it, so then let's just pretend that's just what it is. You can go now!"

Gotou pointed to the exit with his chopsticks in his hand.

"Then we're leaving. Bye."

Inaba commenced. Taichi and Nagase followed her out after saluting.

Just when they were about to leave, Gotou spoke behind them.

"Don't make it too obvious when you all are gonna ditch class next time, okay?"

"Should that be thought of as considerate or simply just a fudge?" Spectators seemed to have diverse opinions.

Excuse me... Although they weren't heard, the three of them still excused themselves formally before leaving the staff room.

In the corridor, Nagase quickly commented,

"As expected of Inaba, only you can pull off a lie so boldly."

"The way she lied with a poker face while maintaining that arrogant attitude..."

"It feels like you would be a master swindler in the future or one of those people who would pull off a car crash just to ask for compensation."

"If you two aren't praising me, stay silent!"

Inaba interrupted and ended Nagase and Taichi's commentary.

"Eh, we actually want to praise you?"

Nagase replied.

"...Your tone was quite serious, wasn't it?"

Looking at it this way, the "[body] exchanging and soul shuffling between the three people", if publicised (of course, on the premise that would be willing to believe it) , would become a situation that would not end with simply just a big clamour. At least, Taichi and the others did not seem to be experiencing such changes... but explicitly, this was just an immediate perception. Things that cannot be seen on the surface may already be undergoing changes.

Nevertheless, if only real harm would not be induced...

-In the blink of an eye, darkness fell.

When the light came flashing back, two unfamiliar girls were in front of him. Although he seemed to be sitting, it felt like his level of vision was lower than usual.

"What's wrong, [Yui]? You just dazed out. Eh, your asparagus fell on the table."

Maybe real harm has already come close.

- "I, I need to use the bathroom."

- "Hmm? What is it? We are still eating. Are you not feeling well?"

- "No... It's not like that... but..."

- "Let me go with you."

- "I-It's fine! I'll go by myself!"

Personality exchange suddenly occurred between Taichi and Kiriyama. Taichi [Kiriyama] avoided the crisis by going to the toilet. Suddenly, Kiriyama's mobile phone rang. It was Inaba calling. Just when Taichi decided to pick up the phone call, he returned back to his own body.

The duration was around three or so minutes.

Although this time went as fast as the wind... Nope, it should be because this time went was as fast as the wind, it had an overwhelmingly pulverizing power that changed Taichi and the others.

---



Noon fell and the last lesson had ended.

As simple as it may be-no matter what happened to Taichi and the others, if those problems didn't affect places outside school, the world would go on as if nothing had happened at all.

While having a chat with nearby friends and preparing to pack up for home, the teacher, Gotou, came in and held a short class meeting. After he had given some contact information and confirmed the students on duty for cleaning, the day's schedule ended.

Today's regular duties were still normal.

Even though Taichi and the members have experienced the strongest storm yet, that in itself will not change the world.

Taichi and his friends, being in the same group, went to clean the bathroom and left the classroom together.

Then, a chill came over him.

---

Just when Taichi was about to leave, he felt like something was undeniably watching him and turned his head towards its source.

What he saw was the class president who had observed the personality exchange of Taichi and Nagase yesterday. She was Fujishima Maiko. Nagase was at her side, and had an embarrassed expression and restlessly signalled Taichi to quickly leave with a hand gesture.

Today's regular duties still haven't changed any...?

"Sorry, I'm late... Uwaghhh!"

When Taichi arrived at the clubroom and opened the door, Nagase quickly popped out from the side.

"Taichi...! You...I have something to tell you~~!"

Nagase was standing in front of him and was blocking his way. As if repressing her about-to-explode emotions, her body was shivering and she showed an expression filled with confusion, unease and nervousness.

"How, how are you, Nagase?"

"Yesterday, before I rushed into the classroom... what happened between you and Fujishima-san! Ahahaha!"

Should this be expected? The matter seems tricky now.

"Eh, it wasn't anything serious..."

"I am the one who will decide whether it is serious or not~~!"

It was quite rare that Nagase would get so furious... Aoki's noise seemed to have spread to Taichi; however, Taichi didn't have the energy to care about that, because Nagase was aggressively spreading a sense of oppression .

If I were to fudge the matter, it would only aggravate the situation! Taichi decided to spit out everything unreservedly. In other words, he told her that Fujishima saw him rub his breasts.

"Whaaaa~! I've been groped~! I can't marry now~!"

Nagase's eyes streamed with tears.

"That, that was just for checking my status, it was inevitable! That was only to confirm whether I had become a girl or not!"

"Nope... or to say, those things don't really matter now... So, so, Fuji, Fuji, Fuji, Fuji, Fuji, Fujishima-san, she... Ahhhhhh!"

Nagase shivered extraordinarily. Maybe this is what you would call being in a state of panic?

"Are you okay, Nagase? What caused you to be in this condition? And the most important thing is, who and what is Fujishima?"

Taichi felt a strange fear... it is unbelievable that someone could force Nagase, who would still smirk even after a personality exchange, into such a state.

"Wait! Before that, I have a question for Taichi!"

Aoki said sharply.

"What is the size of Iori's breast... Uwaghhh!"

---

Inaba punched Aoki. It felt really sad seeing highschoolers still being punched.

"There's no time for that nonsense! I'll tell you if you want to know! Iori is a C-cup, oh and by the way, I'm a B and Yui is an A."

"Why did you say mine along the way!"

Kiriyama stood up and kicked the chair while screaming.

"Sorry, I was just riding the wave."

"Saying Iori's is fine, but why would you say mine just because you're riding the wave! This is obviously malicious!"

Kiriyama turned red with embarrassment. She furiously slapped the table complaining. Inaba giggled happily at the furious Kiriyama.

"It's fine, Yui. Even if you have to accept the fact that your breasts are not satisfying, you still have your charm!"

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Aoki smiled in glee, showing a set of white teeth.

"What do you mean by accepting the fact? What fact is there to accept? Sometimes small and tiny is more valuable!"

"Oh I see. I wasn't sure how the cup size category worked before. So Inaba is a B and Kiriymama is an A...."

"Taichi~~! How can you still observe so calmly... \*cough... cough, cough\*"

Kiriymama choked due to excessive roaring.

A lot had happened, and probably much more will happen in the future; however, the fact that the 'CRC is boisterous' had not changed yet.

Even though Taichi and the club members played for a while, they started to seriously discuss the matter, as it was too serious for them to stay like this.

"Well, let's recap what's been happening now! The first time this occurred was the night three days before... to be accurate, it should have happened two days ago? Yui and Aoki exchanged their personalities while sleeping."

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Secretary Inaba spoke while fixing her eyes on the blackboard.

"Then there was the exchange between Iori and Taichi after school yesterday when the club activities had just begun. After that, it was the shuffle this morning where I became [Yui], Yui became [Aoki], and Aoki became [me]. Also, this afternoon there was also an exchange between Yui and Taichi... That's about it."

"If we reflect like this, we will realize that this is a terrifying situation... exchanging then recovering, then exchanging again... I'm quite paralysed."

Nagase confusedly drooped her head while murmuring.

"Then let's summarise what personality exchange is! Before we start, we must add a premise that our conclusions are made from temporary observations up till now... Well, firstly, it happens suddenly. We have not discovered any conditions that will trigger the event. We won't know when it will happen. Secondly, the duration of exchange does not follow a pattern. The shortest exchange was at noon today, which lasted for three minutes, and the longest was this morning which lasted

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for an hour and a half. Summing the four times and getting the average, it should be about forty minutes. Thirdly, the exchange only happened between us five club members... Actually, this is not yet confirmed. After all, it is quite strange that this phenomenon only happens between us. It is very likely it will spread to other people in the future. Moreover, despite that this is an exchange, it will sometimes occur between three people. Let us confirm this again. Any comments?"

"Ah, actually there is something that really bugs me."

Kiriyama spoke with a shudder.

"Anyway, since there is almost no evidence, go ahead."

Inaba pushed her forward, not caring about Kiriyama's feelings.

"Maybe it's because of me... I've been in this a few times already, so it makes me uncomfortable. When Iori exchanged with Taichi, [Taichi's body] suddenly fell and he was unconscious for a moment, right? Then the day after, when I exchanged with Inaba and Aoki—that is when I changed into [Aoki]—although I sat down on the floor, my body didn't fall altogether, then..."

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Taichi crossed eyes with Kiriyma before replying,

"That's right. I fell on the table when I exchanged with Nagase but I still sat comfortably when I exchanged with Kiriyma, and I was even holding the chopsticks... though I dropped the asparagus on the table."

"Right, this time only my legs bent a bit, I didn't fall to the floor..."

"Does this mean... our bodies are getting used to this?"

Nagase uncertainly proposed.

"I see. Such being the case, it probably is so! Nice, Yui... but should we be glad about being used to this?"

Inaba's implication fell heavily on Taichi and the members.

How long will this phenomenon continue?

If it stays like this, how will it end?

"Then, if there aren't any other comments, let's discuss what we need to do in pragmatic terms."

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Though having not been quite comfortable with the phenomenon at first, Inaba had finally started to pick up her own pace.

Grasping the entire situation-this seems to be Inaba's creed. 'Finding the critical information to grasp and analysing the situation' is her *raison d'être*.

"The first thing to clarify is 'why this has happened'. Such an extraordinary phenomenon must be caused by some conceivable reason; otherwise, dealing with this will become tedious. Do you guys have your own explanations already? I don't remember anything I did that would cause me to be drawn into this supernatural event!"

"By the way, what exactly is causing the soul exchange ? If we were to find the cause of this strange phenomenon, then we should have sensed something different when its condition was fulfilled."

"Stupid Taichi! We are discussing this because we don't know!"

She was right, but still, there was no need to call me stupid, Taichi thought.

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"Hmm... Personality exchange in manga usually occur when two people bump into each other fiercely while running."

"Stupid Aoki-in short, Stoki-what stupid opinions you have... No, this condition itself is already stupid and bizarre enough, so I can't say your opinion is completely irrelevant..."

In fact, someone had raised relevant opinions but was treated worse.

"Dammit, when you admit to something abnormal, you have to admit other abnormal things."

Irritated, Inaba bit her left index finger's nail.

"If we look deeper, we should find a reason-

Just at that moment-

The door was opened from the outside.

Usually, except for the Cultural Research Club members, no one would visit room 401 in the recreation

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building. There weren't any particular reasons to go there . Even if there were, up till now, every time, it would be one of the CRC members visiting the others.

At least in Taichi's memory, only the five members of the CRC visited this room ever since it was allotted to be their clubroom this spring.

To a certain extent, the clubroom was sacred for the five present; however, another person opened the door to the sacred place.

The room was suddenly filled with anxiety.

Some kind of tragedy will befall on them now.

Something 'unusual' is going to happen now.

What is going to happen?

The person masked behind the door is-

-the teacher of class 1C and the supervisor of the Cultural Research Club, Gotou Ryuzen.

"...Hi~... Hello everybody..."

His voice utterly lacked drive.

"I say, Gotou! Don't just barge in with such strange timing! I almost died of shock!"

The usual confident Inaba also seemed to be bewildered by the situation; however, it was useless to shout at Gotou.

"Ayygahhh, this is not my business..."

Gotou's face was a bit strange. He seemed to be lacking in vitality. Even his eyes were only half-open.

"...What is with you? Are you not feeling well?"

Because he looked pale and wan, even Inaba inquired with concern.

"It's nothing at all, I am very healthy... After all, [this person] is strangely fit... it's because of me that there is a lack of vitality, drive, confidence, perseverance, etc."

[Gotou's] way of speech seemed explicitly different from the usual, and what he spoke was also pretty unbelievable.

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Unbelievably wild thoughts slowly spread between Taichi and the members.

"Who are you?"

Nagase commenced with an icy and penetrating stare.

No matter how you look at it, the [living thing with the appearance of Gotou Ryuzen] was speaking.

"..It's very helpful that Nagase-san understood so quickly... this is because explaining everything is too troublesome..."

"Hey, what are you trying to say... Ah?"

Inaba pushed her words as if trying to find any other possibilities.

"Ayyyhh, those aren't the words that you should be looking for, especially in this bizarre condition..."

"Wait, 'Go', what is with you...?"

Not sure whether she was keeping up or not with the situation, Kiriyama asked with a shudder.

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"What is with me? This, of course, is for seeing the interesting faces you will have when you become bewildered by the 'personality exchange'. To be honest, I don't quite want to be here... Ah, also can you please not call me 'Go' or Gotou? After all, I'm not him... Although that doesn't really annoy me at all."

The words of the [living thing with Gotou's body] were a declaration, which collapsed the 'usual' life of the five club members and left a deep scar on their chest.

Although someone (mainly Inaba) proposed that Gotou pulled off this prank because he was eavesdropping on their conversation, they couldn't just acknowledge that it was like that. After all, this guy exactly described the actions that Taichi and the club members took during the personality exchange-including the details that the members didn't discuss. It was just too hard not to believe it was true.

Besides, his personality and his [body] really had been exchanged, so it wouldn't be irrational to say that it wouldn't happen to other people.

"...I know 'you are abnormal', and 'you are not the Gotou that we know of'... Then, who are you?"

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[Gotou] lightly pondered Inaba's inquiry.

"What person...What kind of person should I say...  
Although I do have a name called «Fuusenkazura»[\[4\]](#)."

"«Fuusenkazura»...Why would you have the name of  
such a rare plant?"

Inaba murmured with displease.

"...Ah... who knows? Hmm, so in my circumstance, I  
am observing your presence... Ah, forget it. Okay, just  
take me as someone insignificant."

"Observing our presence...? Then... That... What about  
the real Gotou? Was he sent to [another body]?"

"Ah... It's really helpful that Yaegashi-san is learning  
so quickly... No, in fact, I didn't do something as tricky as  
'personality exchange'... Rather, should I say that I did  
something similar to 'borrowing his body'? But there's no  
need for you to understand that... Ah, so why did I say it.  
.. can we start the main topic now? Ok. Let me start so I  
can go home... thanks."

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«Fuusenkazura» with [the appearance of Gotou], looked really sluggish. He spoke at his own pace and didn't care at all of what others thought and felt.

"Eh... does this mean you are willing to explain the situation to us in detail?"

Aoki's wordings were unexpectedly formal.

"Ah... maybe... but that wouldn't be what you guys expected... After all, replying to your anticipations are meaningless... So... now... Ah, would it really matter if you don't jot down notes? Yeah, it wouldn't really matter as long as Inaba, who has that super memory power, is here."

"How do you even know these things..."

«Fuusenkazura» with [the appearance of Gotou], ignored Inaba's murmur and started to speak.

"Eh... So from now on, and for a long time, between you five... there will be randomly occurring personality exchanges. Firstly, let me express my sympathy for everyone; you guys worked hard... Although personally I don't think of it that way... Ayyah? Did I just say

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something superfluous? Ah... I messed it up again; is this because of my usual soliloquy? I really want to change this habit... Nope, in fact, I haven't really thought of it so deeply, so, just let it be..."

"Are the people and the times chosen for the exchange random?"

Having been silent so far, and still remaining unexpectedly calm, Nagase asked a question. Or let us put it, she remained even more calm than usual, and her voice was icy and cool.

"Ahh... You are right. It certainly is Nagase-san... Then, I will observe your condition during the personality exchange... just that. Ah... Don't worry, I won't be invading your privacy all day and night. I will just watch when something special happens... After all, I don't really want to... Besides, it is quite tedious... So, do you grasp the situation? Even if you say you can't, I'm not planning to make any more explanations."

"This kind of explanation is not enough..."

Taichi murmured his thoughts.

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"Fu... Usually I will shout at you and say, 'what kind of nonsense are you talking about?', but we actually did fall into a nonsensical situation, so let me ask you about what you have said. 'Why did you choose us?' 'Is this situation under your control?' 'How do we end it?' 'What is your intention?'...Let me ask these questions first, despite that I have even more questions to ask you."

Inaba continued after Taichi. «Fuusenkazura»[Gotou] looked at Inaba blankly and stared at her for a while.

"Inaba does know how to pick questions very well... especially by not asking 'how did we do it'... even though that is a question that would usually be asked when something unbelievable happens... but if we look deeper, it's actually not important at all... Ah... my insignificant chatter was too long..."

«Fuusenkazura» still maintained his usual casualness and sluggishness.

"Anyway, you are quite right... Firstly, in regards to the first question, I can only say 'by chance'. Ah... In fact, it's because you guys are really interesting."

"What do you mean by 'really interesting'..."

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Taichi spoke in a low voice.

"Aryyyu, aren't your lives now more interesting compared to normal people? Nevertheless, there are some people who are aware of this while the others aren't."

«Fuusenkazura's» words seemed to be aimed at Taichi, Nagase, Inaba, Kiriyama and Aoki.

What does this imply?

"What were the other questions? Is it under my control , how can it end, and my intention...? Then chronologically... eh? Do I really have to answer these questions? Ah... I completely don't have to. I almost slipped it out of my mouth... That was close! So, now I can only say that you guys just have to get used to the personality exchange. When I feel that 'Ah, this is quite interesting', the exchanges will stop. This duration won't be very long... Although I don't know how you will define 'long', and I don't want to know..."

"When you feel 'it is interesting'... That is completely from your perspective! This at least means that 'when it will end' is at your control... It also means that you started this situation."

Inaba snapped powerfully.

"Ahh... Did I give it away... Or did my question in fact confirm that I did? Anyway, please don't pay too much attention to it... just live as usual, because being worried about it is pointless. Please think of it as 'regardless, everything will be okay in the end, so there's no need to complain'. Don't worry, this won't do any harm to your lives... Also, don't investigate the mechanism behind 'the personality exchange'... You won't understand it anyway. .. If you really have time to spend, just think of issues concerning yourself. That would be conducive to ending this situation... You will be glad and so will I. Ah... this is really gratifying."

Did he want us to just accept all the events that have occurred?... To accept this strange situation?

"Have I missed anything... Ah, right, please keep the personality exchange phenomenon confidential and prevent outsiders from knowing... you guys should

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understand. If it slipped out, there would be more trouble for you than me. Let me emphasize this point ."

«Fuusenkazura» scratched his head, as if trying to remember something, and then he let his vision flow up into the air.

"So... I think I've said all I should... Besides, I've decided to go away pretending that nothing has happened... Work hard! I will support all of you from near the top of my heart... Although, I should say 'from the bottom' even when I'm lying."

[Gotou]- «Fuusenkazura» turned his back and slowly approached the door of the clubroom.

He walked away without paying any attention to Taichi and the other club members; He just said his piece and left the way he wanted to.

"Hey, wait a moment."

-Of course, Inaba's personality prevented her from allowing him to leave so easily.

She swiftly walked to «Fuusenkazura»and grabbed him by the shoulder.

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"I've quietly listened to what you have said, but I still have a bunch of questions to ask. Besides, you haven't replied to any of my questions!"

There was no fear in her words.

"How can we, having been dragged into this stupid situation, let you leave so easily?"

Nagase cracked her knuckles behind Inaba.

When the ever-ambitious Inaba and the hot-headed, uncontrollable Nagase join forces, they become unstoppable.

"So... I say, these aren't the things that you should do... I am not planning to oppose any of you... this is true... but I don't want to be friends with you either... Oh, it'd be better if I didn't say that."

«Fuusenkazura», who seemed bothered by Inaba, turned back slightly and plainly said that to her.

"Don't act like everything will go as you wish!"

Inaba used even more strength to try to make «Fuusenkazura» turn back.

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«Fuusenkazura's» eyes flashed sharply in an instant.

Bam!

Sounds of meat, flesh, and bones crackling altogether whirled around.

At the same time, Inaba's body went flying through the air.

She bounced off Nagase, who was standing behind her, and even Aoki was caught in her way. It was as if it were a scene from an action movie.

Chairs and tables fell to the floor and were smashed.

Moaning sounds emerged.

The falling Inaba landed on Aoki. Inaba pressed her chest, coughed, and even started to vomit. It seemed she had received an elbow blow near her chest.

"Nyaaaaaaa..."

Nagase took a pratfall right on the floor. She rubbed her waist to ease the pain. Although what she did was a bit weird, it seemed she was fine after all.

"I didn't want to do this, even though letting you see my powers could have actually solved the problem much faster... Ah, I don't want to do this... After all, it's very troublesome."

The instant «Fuusenkazura» started to speak, the tense atmosphere returned back to normal.

That was an overwhelming shock.

If someone were to ask what it was that was so shocking, Taichi couldn't answer, but he definitely reckoned it was so.

Inaba, trying to suppress her pain, squeezed a hoarse voice in this calamity.

"All of you...\*cough, cough cough\*... Don't let that guy.. get away!"

"Inaba, don't push yourself too far."

Aoki took care of her as he spoke.

"...Although I disagree with using physical violence, I think it's necessary now."

Taichi said that as he walked forward. «Fuusenkazura» suddenly eyed Taichi and kept perfectly still.

He created a feeling of unease and incomprehensibleness even when having the appearance of [Gotou].

But just like Inaba said, they shouldn't let «Fuusenkazura» go. He was too deeply involved with the current situation. If they just let him go, they might not see him again. Besides, it seemed that it was impossible to negotiate with him verbally. Physical violence was a must.

- Taichi thought that he should shoulder the sole responsibility of the event.

His [Gotou's] appearance made it intractable to do this. But however intractable this was, it was crucial.

With this in mind, Taichi stepped forward, but an arm stretched in front of his chest.

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"Wait, Taichi, I will handle this."

Stretching her white-clothed arm to stop Taichi was-Kiriyama.

"But, if I don't do it-"

"Taichi, there is no reason for you to be the one to do it."  
."

Kiriyama tried to smile gently to cover the slight frown of her eyebrows. She was like a stubborn, unreasonable child.

"Besides, I am more powerful than you, right? It'll be fine, I'll take care of him right now!"

Taichi, despite wanting to refute her, fell silent and bit his tongue. Kiriyama was indeed more powerful than him. Taichi, as a boy, was stronger than Kiriyama. But in real combat, Kiriyama, the Girls' Full Contact Karate champion, who was even called a prodigy of Karate, would be more powerful.

But her voice was shivering.

So...

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"So, let's do this together..."

"Don't interfere."

Taichi's suggestion was turned down before he managed to finish it.

"Yui! Let me support..."

"Scram!"

She showed no mercy to Aoki at all times.

Lightly tipping her toe, Kiriyama spread her feet apart, balancing herself. She had assumed a combat stance. Her chestnut hair flew in the air for a few milliseconds before being attracted by gravity and gradually starting to fall.

The aura Kiriyama let off drastically changed.

With only a height of 150cm or so, Kiriyama, despite being so small, exuded an aura that seemed to say that if anyone were to as much as twitch, she would be upon them at once.

Her posture was like a bull in a china shop.

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But «Fuusenkazura» showed no sign of fear and stared blankly at her.

"Sorry for making you wait so long... Or should I say, why were you willing to wait for me? Just then, you didn't show any signs that you were intending to escape."

Kiriyama gradually narrowed their distance and asked

"...Ah, really... That would be nice if I did... But I got to see something interesting, so I... But that's just something as trivial as to make people comment with 'Is that it?'..."

"...I will stop you from being so calm and relaxed."

Kiriyama stepped forward at the same time.

Then she kicked the floor hard on her second step and leapt forward.

"'Go', sorry-!"

Her flying kick was like an eagle stretching its claws to catch its prey.

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Despite that there was over 20cm of height disparity, the flying kick was directly slammed at «Fuusenkazura's» face- but was stopped by «Fuusenkazura's» arm just before the kick was about to hit.

Kiriyama had aimed at his face and flying-kicked him with extreme speed.

As if it were meant to be, «Fuusenkazura» effortlessly stopped the kick.

To a normal person like Taichi, what was happening in front of him was shocking enough, but their continued battle was truly beyond his imagination. He wouldn't have thought that it would continue after she landed on the floor.

Kiriyama swung a low punch at «Fuusenkazura» while landing.

Her graceful flying hair served as as a foil to her beautiful, bird-like posture.

But...

«Fuusenkazura» acted as if nothing had happened and used his other free hand to grip Kiriyama's right wrist.

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Although «Fuusenkazura» did this easily, even Taichi knew that this kind of action was near impossible.

When Kiriyama landed with both of her feet, she sat on the floor helplessly and worn out. It was only her right hand that was caught, but looking at her paleness, she had already lost all her morale.

She drooped her head and started to whimper like a newborn fawn that could do nothing but cry. Her powerful image had vanished instantly.

"Yui!"

"Kiriyama!"

Nagase and Taichi flew to Kiriyama.

Just at this instant-

- Taichi's vision twisted and vanished.

In the next moment, he was kneeling down and holding on to Inaba's body.

He became confused for a moment.

Then he understood what had happened.

If he was holding on to Inaba, does that mean he had changed to [Aoki]?

[Inaba] coughed on the wrists of Taichi [Aoki].

"Hey, are you feeling alright?"

"\*Cough, cough cough\*... Inaba-san, this is really painful."

[Inaba] said 'Inaba-san'. Within the club members... no, in the whole school, the only person who would call Inaba by that name would be Nagase.

Taichi lifted his head to confirm what was going on around him.

At one corner, he could see someone with [the appearance of Taichi] lying impotently on the floor. By putting the events that just happened into consideration, that should be Kiriyama, right?

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Being gripped on the wrist by «Fuusenkazura» and still sitting on the floor, was [Kiriyama], who still could not move and thus remained rigid. Taichi saw that her face was as pale as a sheet of paper.

Then, someone with [Nagase's appearance] crossed her hands and stood sternly.

"Ayyahh, could it be that... personality exchange occurred now? This maybe... is a bit interesting."

«Fuusenkazura» looked down at this chaos and spoke in an opposite, or in a way that didn't show he was interested at all.

"Ah... Looks like the timing is right, I must go now..."

«Fuusenkazura» let go of [Kiriyama's] hand and stretched his hands towards the door.

"Hey, at least answer me one question before you leave!"

The person who halted «Fuusenkazura» had <the appearance of Nagase>.

"We know that we can't stop you, so I want to ask... can we by any chance meet you... meet «Fuusenkazura» again?"

"...This is hard to say. When this situation ends, we should meet again. But I can't promise you. Ah, this person is [Mr. Gotou], right? Please don't be so harsh to him... Besides, I don't want you guys to waste your time on these things."

"Um... This means that it'll be hard to strike back... Hmmph! Maybe this actually isn't the case... «Fuusenkazura», although I want to destroy you completely, I can't... This is quite lamentable. Can I say what I've observed at the end?"

[Nagase] laughed fearlessly and spoke with an attentive tone. The only person whose personality could say such things in this kind of situation was Inaba.

"When you arrived, you said that you came here because the scared expressions we make when our personalities get switched is amusing. In other words, if we weren't so interesting after we exchanged, you wouldn't have come. Also, considering that you were pretty impressed by my style of inquiry, this implies that

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you have already done this a few times, right? On the other hand, if you have a special name called «Fuusenkazura» this implies that there are more people like you out there, right?"

Even when stuck in this mess, Inaba still managed to figured out the opponent's motive by utilizing these small bits of information. Despite having the plain appearance of [Nagase], her face was still drawn with an evil grin. This was, in fact, quite scary.

"...Who knows?"

Even after hearing Inaba's words, «Fuusenkazura» had replied simply.

«Fuusenkazura» for the first time, curved up the corners of his mouth. This was a face that never appeared on [Gotou]... A sombre face with a freaky smile.

Invisible threats sparked between Inaba [Nagase] and «Fuusenkazura» [Gotou].

But then «Fuusenkazura» reverted to his usual sluggishness.

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"So... I wish you all good luck... Ah... I didn't have any enthusiasm and didn't plan to raise your morale, but I said it due to the atmosphere... Maybe I just wanted to say these words."

«Fuusenkazura» dropped these words, left a pile of unreasonable duties to Taichi and the club members, and then just left the clubroom.

By now, Taichi found out that Aoki was the person with the [appearance of Kiriyama] by process of elimination.

On that note-

Later, still curious about the incident in the clubroom, the club members went to the staff room and saw the teacher of class 1C and Cultural Research Club advisor Gotou Ryuzen there. When they asked him, "What have you been doing?", he replied, "What? I've been trying to complete this document... Strange. Hey, why did time fly by without there being any progress? How mysterious this is! You guys should include this as one of the seven wonders of school and publish it in the next issue of «Bunken News»." Inaba seemed unable to stand him. Then "Hmm? My left hand hurts a little... Oh? It turned

red! Wait, if we combine these two elements and make a conclusion... I understand! My pain is from using my left hand as a pillow to sleep! That... that's what happened! Ayahh... What a headache, what a headache..." These soft words drove Inaba nuts and she, despite being in the staff room, used a headlock on Gotou (25 years old, occupation: teacher) and swirled her fist to push his head down.

"Ou, ou, ou, ou...ouch, Inaba! I am still a teacher, you know!"

"If you really are a teacher, then you should think and act like one! Helping you is a waste of time and effort!"

Taichi seemed to understand why «Fuusenkazura» used [the body of Gotou], although he could only speculate if «Fuusenkazura» had the same thought.

## Chapter 4 - The Week of Fostering Relationships and Detonating Bombs

In Yamaboshi High School, participating in club activities is mandatory—this is the only thing reckoned to be troublesome in the school. Otherwise, other school rules are very loose.

From the perspective of the school, putting more effort into their clubs means that students have less time for delinquency and malicious activities. Loose rules lets the students become more independent.

Still, this disgusted some students. They thought that having mandatory club activities for high schoolers was just unreasonable. Though, on the positive side, club budgets and facilities in the school transcended those of other schools.

The most attractive thing in this school was the large number of clubs.

When there were enough club members, the club could do whatever it wanted. Thanks to the loose admission procedures, clubs were made one by one and quickly became large in number. The total number of

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clubs established was even over a hundred. Despite this, most clubs were abandoned after a few years. The number of clubs rose and fell as new clubs were created and old, inactive clubs were slowly erased from the listing.

However, even if the club was not currently active, the club still existed in name. Or at least, until the administration got around to removing it. Therefore, the first years would still have to make a choice from the hundred clubs on the list.

One thing of note is that there is a rule that states 'if there are no more than five members, the club cannot have activities with the name of the club'.

In Yamaboshi High, because of the mandatory club participation, newcomers must hand in their club application before an appointed date. If they chose an active club, they would directly enter the club. However, if they chose a club that existed only in name, they would then have to find other newcomers or club transfers from students in year 2 or 3 in order to meet the five member threshold.

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Despite this, most students want to enter clubs that are still running. After all, most of the choices were quite normal and had enough members. More importantly, not many want to put in the effort to revitalise clubs that were inactive.

Though there were students who wanted to join an inactive club, those students usually found others to join with them first. Therefore there hasn't been a time when someone wanted to join a club but there weren't enough people.

However, there are exceptions.

After all, no matter what place or time, where there is society, there are outlaws.

For example, there was a boy who had an extreme enthusiasm about professional wrestling, knew nothing about the five-person rule, and handed his application for 'professional wrestling study club' immediately after seeing the club name in the list. His name was Taichi.

There was also a girl who invested a lot in karate up until middle school, but whether or not this was the reason why she became particularly interested in cute

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things is unknown. And so, she found the 'Fancy club' on the list, but had no idea that the club was only active for two years (six years ago) and knew nothing about its current condition. She believed that its existence was some kind of revelation from above, and even when others told her that there wouldn't be enough people, she still advocated (sillily) that it would be fine because there were a lot of cute girls that year and wrote 'Fancy club' on her application letter. The one who did all of this was a girl named Kiriyama Yui.

Another example was someone who described her hobby as 'collecting and analysing data'. She originally planned to join the computer club, but because of an acute argument with the club president during the last day of club activities (which was ascribed to her arrogance and the club president's low tolerance of it), she hurriedly got her application back from the teacher. Instead, she planned to revitalise a branch of the computer club which had detached due to prior arguments—the data processing club. The one who did all of this was a girl named Inaba Himeko.

Yet another example was a boy who believed in an urban legend. According to this legend, in Yamaboshi High there was a club called the 'Play Club'. It was fine

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for universities to have such clubs, but they don't exist in high schools. He thought that he could join a club by writing the name of the club in the application, even when there wasn't such a club in the list. He felt that the club was super interesting because it was not on the list (and of course, since it did not exist). However, instead of being admitted to this illusory club, his application was treated as if he were applying to form a new club. The name of this boy was Aoki Yoshifumi.

A final example was a girl who thought that choosing from a list of clubs was hard and annoying. Thinking that leaving the choice to fate would be exciting and moving, and also thinking that it would make for brilliant and fantastic memories (or maybe it was just her own perception), the one who wrote 'for teacher to choose♥' for her chosen club was a girl named Nagase Iori.

The laws of this society called 'school' will bind such outlaws, especially those who are just high schoolers, forcing them to cooperate with the rest of society.

But this point had to be marked with an addendum of 'usually.'

Indeed, in most cases, outlaws might as well succumb to those who have might and power.

But sometimes outlaws will rebel.

For example, Yaegashi Taichi, Nagase Iori, and Inaba Himeko from class 1C in Yamaboshi High replied with, respectively, "Teacher, I haven't heard that it wouldn't work if there aren't five people", "Nyaa, so I said I let 'Go' decide... I am looking forward to hearing your choice!" and "So can you please postpone the deadline slightly? I will find another four."

Or for example, Kiriyama Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi from class 1A in Yamaboshi High who said, "Teacher! There must be something wrong here! Please can you try soliciting people again? All high school girls like cute stuff, so there shouldn't be any problem there!" and "Eh? That club doesn't exist? Then can I try to establish one? It needs five people? I can gather them real quick..." respectively.

In spite of their efforts, in the end none of them would achieve what they wanted because the world was not simple or feeble enough that a rebellion started by just anyone could change it so easily. In most cases, those

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advocacies are directly abolished or pulverized by the rule.

But there surely are exceptions.

Rebels will sometimes cause unexpected changes.

For example, one who was basically thoughtless, sluggish and perfunctory — on one hand, unbound by the rules, and on the other, absent-minded — thought that persuading Taichi, Nagase and Inaba to join an existing club would be problematic. Then, he thought, "Let me just put these three together and create a club that will let them freely enjoy themselves!" This person was on the side of the law, but listened to the rebels. The one who proposed this new and unusual idea was the teacher named Gotou Ryuzen.

Another example was a beautiful, naïve woman who was quite thoughtless, liked to join the fun, and was alleged to be popular in her school days. The boys reckon her as "good, very moe" and valued her prestigiously, although others thought that her competency on the educational side of things was still unconfirmed. When she heard that Gotou said "Because of this, I'm planning to establish a new club", she proposed, "Well, there are

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two suitable students in my class". Thus, she decided to let Kiriyma and Aoki join the club through this concise conversation. Also on the side of the law was the teacher of class 1A, Hirata Ryouku.

Through these multiple coincidences, the Cultural Research Club was established.

In other words, the CRC is a signature of victory of the outlaws. It is the chemical product produced from aberrant students and teachers.

The latter seems more meaningful right now... or not... whatever, it is just a trivial problem after all.

The aim of the newly-established Cultural Research Club was 'to break all constraints and laws, so as to investigate everything in a different light'. Or in short, 'do whatever we want'.

Therefore, Taichi and the other four utilised the club budget in accord with the aim of the club—basically, to do anything they wanted.

Nevertheless, a high school club could not be left alone so easily, so the school called for every club to hand in a monthly report on their activities and make a record in

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order to keep the right for the club to stay. The Cultural Research Club reorganizes the activity record into the «Bunken News» and posts and distributes it in the school (unfamiliar and crazy content seemed to be very popular among a handful of students).

But, one day in September—

The Cultural Research Club faced a life-and-death situation... No, the existence of the club did not really matter; the important thing was the impact that this may have on each of their lives.

'This', of course, is the 'personality exchange phenomenon that occurred between the five' and their encounter with «Fuusenkazura».



"I think all of you should understand that our meeting is to evaluate our behaviour for the week!"

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Taichi, Nagase, Kiriyma and Aoki responded differently to Inaba's passionate and somewhat angry words.

The encounter with «Fuusenkazura» was last Friday, a week before. Today is Saturday and the five members of the Cultural Research Club gathered in Inaba's house.

"So, let's start... Hmm?"

A telephone rang in one of the rooms.

"Sorry, let me first catch the phone. Please wait here until I come back."

Inaba spoke cheerfully and playfully to them as if they were children. After that, she left the room.

"Hmm... Inaba's room is really similar to her! The last time we came was when we had to decide the itinerary for 'the play camp', right?"

Aoki looked around the room as he spoke. Indeed, the whole room was monochromatic and looked tranquil and mature. Necessities like a bed, a table, a bookshelf, a TV and a computer were there but there was nothing

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more than that. The room was streamlined for productivity and efficiency—it was surely coherent with Inaba's mood.

"Nyaaa ~ Inaba is so lucky to have such a wide room that can fit the five of us. I do have a room of my own, but because of its small size and some of my necessities, there isn't any space left. And because my sister doesn't have a TV in her room, she always comes to my room and stays there... Or I should say, how did she grow so big and tall! She is even taller than me... though I think being small makes me cuter."

Kiriyama sat on the floor and mumbled as she ate the snacks on the table.

"Are you talking about your breasts?"

Taichi spoke sincerely, but—

"Yikes! It hurts!"

The biscuits cracked upon reaching Taichi's face, causing an overwhelming pain.

"How did you get that?! I was talking about my height! Oh, I get it. It's because you're always thinking things

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about breasts, so you came to that conclusion...! I thought Taichi would be different from the others... I can't believe that you would be a pervert like that person sitting over there."

"Nope, this is because you said being small is cuter..."

"Also, are you alluding to me? I have to deny that."

"Rejected."

It is pitiful to see Aoki suffering from this unfair treatment.

"Hey! Pick up those biscuits on the floor, or else Inaba will get angry! After all, she is quite orderly."

"Right! I don't want to be shouted at because of those perverts."

Listening to Nagase's reminder, Kiriyama crawled on the floor and started picking up the crumbs. Her chestnut long hair fell towards the floor. Accompanied with her petite body and her hazy lotus-bordered one-piece dress, her shadows evoked a certain allure.

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Kiriyama also discovered her own scattered crumbs that had fell on the floor when she ate her snacks, and when she decided to also pick them up—

"Two boys were staring firmly and anticipated seeing an exposed upskirt of Yui, who was busily picking up the crumbs."

Nagase charged in with a novel style dialogue.

"Na, Nagase! What are you talking about? I would never do such—"

"Dammit! It was very close!"

The boy beside Taichi was surely a blunt and stupid guy.

Kiriyama hurriedly pressed down her skirt and sat on the floor with a red face and a quivering body.

Taichi felt a sense of unease but couldn't come up with any methods to defuse the situation.

Kiriyama gradually approached the biscuit plate with her hands.

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"Yui, don't do it! If you were to throw them, Inaba will get very angry!"

Nagase had caused the problem, but she still tried to solve the issue in lieu of just laughing.

"So use this 'pillow of oblivion' instead!"

—Or not.

"Nagase, I think using that is much more painful! Also, 'the pillow of oblivion' sounds far too serious!"

But Taichi's complaints went unheard. While cackling loudly, Nagase threw the 'pillow of oblivion' to Kiriyama who turned her body and kicked the pillow right before it was about to touch the floor.

"Oh, I can see her pants now."

.....Kiriyama pushed harder after hearing Aoki.

"Fire——!"

Kiriyama's spinning kick landed right on the 'pillow of oblivion', and it whizzed through the air into Aoki with a frightening 'boom'.

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"Awwwaaghh!"

Even with his hands in a defensive posture, Aoki was blown away by the pillow.

The door opened at the same moment—

"Hey, what are you guys shouting ab..."

'Bam!'

Though it had decreased in momentum since it bounced off Aoki, the 'pillow of oblivion' still whizzed through the air with overwhelming speed and beautifully knocked into Inaba's face — which it seemed to hit perfectly. Inaba's head fell back due to the surprising impact. While transferring momentum, the 'pillow of oblivion' did not fall, but instead, clung on Inaba's face.

Time stood still — the next few seconds seemed like an eternity. Inaba finally righted herself and the 'pillow of oblivion' fell down.

Inaba was standing there with a crooked and fierce face.

The other four could do nothing but to quiver repeatedly.

"...Raise your hands and confess your sins if you have made up your mind...!"

Consequently, Nagase and Taichi were flicked on their forehead once while Kiriyama and Aoki had theirs flicked twice. Aoki was also rewarded a slap on his face.

After meeting with «Fuusenkazura» who was in [ Gotou's body], Taichi and the other members could do nothing but to accept the challenge of the personality exchange.

First of all, they could not neglect this. The exchange could occur at any time; hence, they could not just stay in their homes.

Secondly, they could not oppose the phenomenon. Even though they really wanted to oppose it, they had no idea of how that could be done. The only thing that they could do was to find «Fuusenkazura», the person who was closely related to the phenomenon, and grab more information. But no matter how much they observed [ Gotou], there was not a trace of «Fuusenkazura» left in him.

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They could not come up with any plans to counteract this phenomenon.

The only thing they could grasp on to in this metaphorical darkness was the little objective information «Fuusenkazura» had given them.

There was no reason to deny his words. In other words , they had to accept their fate and hope that this would end sooner or later.

Their retrospective meeting finally started after a set of hurdles. Inaba was, certainly, the host and the final decision maker.

"Then, let's first review what we learned last week. That is, what to do when our personalities have exchanged. The fundamental rule is to contact the person you have exchanged with to confirm your status. Then pretend you're that person and act like him/her and prevent others from finding out. In this regard, we could use some work... Concentrate!!"

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Sitting cross-legged, Inaba stared at everyone. Her back was still straight even with this sitting posture. In fact, she looked more like she was meditating than sitting cross-legged.

"First, let's start with the basics. Anyone who has gone into the washroom of the wrong sex while exchanged, raise your hands!"

"Yes." "Yes." "Yes." "Yes."

Everyone had went to the wrong washroom except Inaba,

"Why would you go into the wrong washroom? If it was an exchange between opposite sexes, you should be more careful! This is old school material, guys!"

"It's just hard to change my habits all of a sudden... And in most cases, we are going to the toilet to escape from being found... Yor?"

"Kiriyama, what do you mean by 'yor'? It's because of the exchange that we became more and more embarrassed to go to the washroom!"

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High schoolers who would mess up which washroom to go into? More than being chaffed at, these people were more likely to be isolated. Especially when people like Taichi or Inaba went into the wrong washroom, witnesses could not help it. Only a person with an appearance like [Aoki] would make people shout, "Pervert!" "Hentai!" (Kiriyama was that person and she was sent to the teacher to handle the situation. She almost cried because of this.)

"Hey, I have a suggestion. What if we go to the washroom beforehand when we haven't exchanged yet?"

Kiriyama raised her hand and asked.

"Didn't you just say that it has become embarrassing to go to the washroom?"

Inaba murmured helplessly.

"But, if we girls become [Taichi] or [Aoki], then we will see that scary thing when we go into the washroom! Yuck ~!"

Kiriyama patted her own arm, as if trying to make herself calm from the impact that she gave herself from remembering what she had experienced.

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"I think there is no reason to become so sensitive. After all, it's just something on your body. And you will go into the toilet room to prevent yourself from touching that, right? But after you have mentioned that, Aoki and I will be extra careful of that."

"Alright. Thanks, Taichi."

"Hey, Taichi, why did you just increase your own popularity? I will also be more careful, Yui."

"It's fine if you are not so sensitive. Look, Yui, even I can already pee while standing!"

Nagase cackled.

"That's just too much. And also, you shouldn't say that so jubilantly."

Taichi responded with a sharp-tongued response. He was left speechless when Nagase counter-attacked with a chaste smile.

"Right, the things on these guys aren't that big a deal. On that note, Taichi's thing is bigger."

Inaba grinned maliciously.

"Why do you care about these things... And please don't compare them! Also, Aoki! Please don't be so gloomy about this!"

"Well, let's leave this alone then. The thing is, is our virginity... are our bodies safe?"

Inaba stopped her jokes and inquired seriously.

Taichi could be distinct on this point.

"They're safe, right... Aoki?"

"Well, I did enter a girl's body... so it's inevitable that I would like to try those things... Eh? What? Don't look at me with those eyes! I didn't really do it... because it's unethical and there wasn't a time where I could go to the toilet... Ayahh... I am serious! Please stop glaring at me so sharply,ahaha..." Aoki's empty laughs reverberated throughout the room.

"I did nothing of the sort."

"Taichi... Hm, if you say so..."

Inaba was leaning to approval.

"Of course I also..."

"...You sure?"

Inaba checked Aoki with suspicious eyes.

"I'm speaking the truth! Trust is important these days, right? I wouldn't do such despicable deeds."

"—As you say."

Inaba hesitated for a moment before expressing wryly. Taichi wanted to ask her "What's the matter?" but before he could, Kiriyma spoke to Aoki.

"Nyaa, speaking of which, when you became [me] in my house, you called my mother 'mum' instead of 'mother' which I usually say. And you always confuse which room is mine. That's unforgivable."

"Sorry. Although I did get asked a few times, 'what is with you today, sister?'"

"That is a huge problem!"

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Inaba coughed twice to interrupt in the midst of their conflict.

"That is something to be properly taken care of. On the other hand, there are already rumours that there is something strange going on among us. Still, it's highly unlikely that they'll discover that the reason behind our behaviour is the exchange of our personalities."

Truly, without prior knowledge of the situation at hand, it would be hard for others to imagine what had happened. That's why our strange behaviour is usually accounted for as part of that person's personality.

"Speaking of being in our homes... Iori, when I became [you], even at midnight there was nobody home. What happened...? Well, I just think that a high school girl staying at home alone in the night is a bit dangerous..."

Kiriyama gradually diminished her voice, probably because the thing that she was mentioning could not be easily said.

Nagase stagnated for a while and didn't respond.

Utter silence fell upon the room.

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"Oh... Well... That... That is because there wasn't a chance for me to talk about it. Actually, my parents are divorced. Right now, I live with my mother who's really busy... something like that. If something were to happen, I have pepper spray to counter the average boy. Then I can hit the hell out of them. So it's not something to worry about..."

"It \*is\* something to worry about! Even if they were just normal guys, the most dangerous thing to do is to treat them too carelessly! If you don't make good preparations beforehand, it'll be too late when something happens!"

Excited and indignant, Kiriyama cried with all her might.

"Eh...? Oh, uh...sor, sorry."

Nagase, flabbergasted, apologised.

This is really rare... No, this is something that has never happened before.

After Nagase apologised, Kiriyama calmed down and her aggravation subsided. She then lowered her head in apology.

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"Hm, ah, I should be the one to say sorry."

The atmosphere became stiff and heavy.

—Looking back, they were quite lucky in some sense.

Even though something as aberrant as 'personality exchange' occurred, nothing special changed amongst them.

Of course, some inconvenience still existed.

But until now, the only changes that have occurred were superficial.

When people's personalities exchange between themselves randomly, is it possible that nothing will not be damaged or ruined?

Nope. No matter what, it's impossible.

It is just that those events have not yet arrived.

But how long will their luck stay?

Then, if 'those events' really occur, what will we become?

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When people connect with each other, how will things transpire?

Inaba clapped her hands to make a 'bam' sound.

"To conclude, the duration of personality exchange, which is the time when some other person stays [in your body], only lasts for less than a few hours, so if every person uses [another's body] carefully, shoulder their responsibilities, and remedy any problems as soon as possible, it will mitigate the effects of the phenomenon. Of course, with only these measures, it's insufficient to solve the problem... Nah, for now it's still useless to talk about that."

Although a bit grudgingly, Inaba still managed to soothe the atmosphere.

Everyone passed the work of controlling the scene to Inaba, not just because of her naturally demanding and objective attitude, but more because of her ability to handle such situations. This was what Taichi thought.

She then switched to an ironic tone.

"The problem now is dealing with real harm that has been done, right, Aoki?"

"Eh, what harm?" Aoki gazed at her with his jaws wide-opened.

Inaba fell forward in shock.

"How could you forget? You scored a dismal mark on my English quiz!"

"Ah... That. But I really worked hard for it..."

"Seven out of thirty and you say that you worked hard for it! Thanks to you, I will be heading to the next remedial lesson! And that together with my usually good grades creates a reason for me to be questioned... What the hell! Even if you are stupid, causing trouble for others still makes you guilty."

"I can't help it. I don't want to be stupid, you know."

Aoki played with his hair discontentedly.

"Okay, Inaba, don't be so harsh on him. After all, that quiz won't affect your final grades; besides, even if a stupid person works and tries his best, he is still stupid."

Taichi tried to reconcile them, but then...

"Right, Inaba, stupid people can't be cured, even by dying."

Nagase spoke.

"Yeah, Inaba, stupid people can just die stupidly."

Kiriyama followed the flow.

"Everyone, do you not recognise that you're not helping me? Or should I say, your words have gone too far?!"

Aoki was indeed beloved by everyone.

Although you may think this isn't something serious, it actually is. We don't know how long this personality exchange will last. If it continues until our mid-terms or finals..." <--it's American. UK equivalent would just be "exams"-->

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The three people (Taichi, Nagase and Kiriyma) exhaled and made an 'Ahhh' sound in unison. They started to imagine the words that Inaba deliberately left unfinished and became afraid.

The stupid person and the core of the problem, commenced.

"Eh? What do you mean? If I became [somebody else] during my exams and somebody becomes [me] then my number of failed subjects will decrease! Phew ~ "

"Then, similarly, somebody else will have more failed subjects! Or may I say, no one in this room fails exams except for you!"

Inaba's ironic words were not sympathetic towards Aoki.

"Let's think positively... and I mean positive! I believe this phenomenon will end very soon."

Kiriyma played with her hair and pressed her head while mumbling.

They continued their retrospection boisterously-- which had started to become mere chatting mid-way--

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but when evening passed, Inaba said, 'my parents are coming back,' and the meeting was forced to end.

After leaving Inaba's place, Taichi, Kiriyama, and Aoki said farewell to Nagase, whose route was different, and they started to head back home. In theory, that is. When the three came to the interchange terminal, Aoki and Nagase switched personalities.

They contacted each other and confirmed their route home before continuing. Should they not recover by then, they would randomly find a place to kill time.

"Ah, so this is [Aoki's] perspective... it's quite high! This is my first time being [Aoki]. Well, his height is above 170cm."

Nagase [Aoki] was jovial and showed no sign of nervousness.

"Keep it down... No, actually, even if someone heard you, they wouldn't know what you were talking about."

Taichi wanted to remind her, but then changed his mind.

"Oh... Yui looks so petite and cute."

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Nagase [Aoki], while teasing her, stretched out her hand to touch Kiriyama. However, Kiriyama knocked her hand away and ducked immediately. She also kept her distance from Nagase.

"Eh?"

"Ah..."

The two suddenly fell into an awkward silence.

They wanted to say that it wasn't a big deal, but the atmosphere made them reluctant.

Then, Nagase [Aoki] smiled wryly in embarrassment.

"No. It's not what you think, Nagase. I'm not keeping away because I hate you! It's just because you became [Aoki]. So..."

"I understand, Yui. I should be the one apologising... I was a bit reckless just now."

"...If Aoki sees this, the odds that he will weep are about eighty percent."

Thinking of his friend, Taichi sighed.

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"That's because Aoki always has a strange attitude and would suddenly jump on me, so I would block him out of conditional reflex. I don't really hate him like you think I do! He may be stupid, but he's not evil..."

"Oh, well, you're right."

Although she responded with a few jokes, Kiriyama used a very serious tone. This left Taichi quite puzzled.

Then, Kiriyama's tram arrived and the other two could only say farewell in this stiff atmosphere.

Eventually, they arrived at the station nearest to Aoki's home, but because [Aoki]'s inner personality was still Nagase, Taichi decided to spend his time with her and got off the tram as well.

At the present stage of the personality exchange, considering all five Cultural Research Club members, exchanges occurred between one and eight times a day and the exchange time varied from as short as one minute to as long as two hours. The duration wasn't as long as it seemed.

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Taichi and Nagase [Aoki] went to the waiting room in the station. There were no other passengers in the room.

Taichi looked to his right and saw a familiar friend's face. But that wasn't who it was. Instead, another friend, a female friend, was sitting there.

"I was too careless..."

Nagase [Aoki] was silent throughout the journey in the tram. But she started to mumble because of boredom.

"Are you talking about your conversation with Kiriyama? Hmm, I think that's because of the wrong timing. You don't need to feel so regretful of that."

"It's good to think like that... But I can't... I don't want to do things that would upset people... I can't... I should never do that."

Nagase fell strangely silent. But it looked as if another kind of remorse was torturing her, even larger than the remorse for what she did to Kiriyama.

"Nyaaa ~ ..." Nagase [Aoki] bent her body and covered her face with her hands.

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Sensing her feeble and thin presence, Taichi was determined to support her to prevent her from shattering.

"Are you okay, Nagase? Is there anything I can do to help?"

Nagase [Aoki] didn't reply and stayed in static.

Time passed for a while.

Taichi felt it wasn't good to stare at someone for too long so he decided to place his eyes on the scenery outside.

"...Taichi."

Not long after, Nagase [Aoki] commenced lightly and softly.

"What's the matter?"

Taichi responded slowly.

"Well, after all this started, I went to the old bookstore to take a look at some so-called 'personality exchange' mangas."

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"Oh, so you read mangas too."

Taichi couldn't see what she was trying to say.

"Most of those mangas talk about exchanges between boys and girls. Also, it was very likely that, in the manga, the girl who had become the [boy] would play with the thing on the boy's body!"

Nagase said with a bright and cheerful smile.

"So I'm thinking if should I also play with that thing on a boy..."

"Wait, wait a moment. What does this have to do with the conversation with Kiriyama?"

"Hehe, hohoho, what you saying, Taichi? How could there be any correlation?"

"Hey, where did that solemn atmosphere go? I was wondering if there were any important implications in your words so I concentrated and listened to you... Give me back my efforts!"

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Nagase changed her mood really fast. She had looked agonised... but when did she actually start to think about those stupid things?

"I only said to do something with that thing on a boy. But I don't know how to do that so I want Taichi to help me to do that to that thing on a boy..."

"Stop talking about this! Also, although I don't know what you mean, but I won't help you to do 'that' to 'that thing' on a boy!"

"But if I were to do **that** on a boy, being inexperienced, in case something like **that** happens, it would be... like **that**."

"Enough, so you shouldn't do **that** to **that thing** on a boy, then **that** won't happen because you didn't do **that** on **that thing** on a boy."

"True, if I don't do **that** to **that thing** on a boy's body, then maybe **that** won't happen because I didn't do **that** on **that thing** on a boy. But at the same time, I'll not be able to do **that** to **that thing** on a boy to then rouse **that condition** which is called **that**...Nyaaa?"

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"Nagase, let me say, you actually just want to say **that** and **that** all the time."

"My secret was unveiled ~"

"You even have the guts to say that!"

"But Taichi became excited by our game too, right?"

...Taichi couldn't deny that. Indeed, he was excited by their game.

"Hmm... Seriously, I would never do 'that' on 'that thing' on a boy. If I did, I would be hated, right?"

"Definitely..."

"If that's that, then I wouldn't do it."

Nagase [Aoki] cackled. Because the smile was filled with satisfaction and glee, Taichi suddenly thought of—

"Is it because you wanted to investigate what actions to take during a personality exchange that you flipped through those mangas about 'personality exchange'?"

"Now is the time for Nagase Iori to question Taichi!"

---

Nagase intentionally interrupted Taichi. She looked a bit embarrassed while she [Aoki] made a ringing sound.

Seemingly depressed, but becoming excited in a flash. Appearing like she wasn't thinking much and just doing what she wanted, but actually thinking indefinitely and planning before all her actions. Saying erotic jokes without flushing or breathing heavily, but becoming embarrassed about odd things...The multitudinous expressions of Nagase became an attractive pearl in the eyes of Taichi.

Then, Nagase had another expression, an expression that was different and was hard to describe.

"We all believe that humans use our souls, or our consciousnesses, or our 'personality', to determine our identity, or who we are. Or in other words, this [body of Aoki] which contains the soul of Nagase is thought to be Nagase Iori. Although, this explanation brings us to a problem: our souls, or what we call conscious or personalities, are vague existences. What I mean by vague is that we can't see it nor touch it."

As if keeping distance from what was happening, a smile appeared on Nagase's [Aoki's] face.

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"That is why, even though we agree that our existence is determined by our souls, or consciousnesses, or personalities, we usually determine each person's identity with their [body]. Look, we are experiencing the exchange of personalities everyday. But even when somebody feels that we were acting strange, they won't know the truth. Only we would, right?"

Nagase, as if a host on a show delivering a well-prepared speech, spoke calmly.

"That's right. In other words, our [bodies] are the foundations of who we are. But what if the [body], because of the personality exchange, becomes something vague as well? Can we still live with our own identities? I'm just popping ideas."

She then left a playful smile—right at that moment, [Aoki] momentarily closed his eyes and then opened them again.

"...Ayahh? Oh, Taichi." [Aoki] spoke and looked at his body.

"Hm... Oh, looks like I've recovered... Phew ~ I've finally come back to my own [body]... Hm, after a bit of

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thought, what I said about coming back to my own body seems a bit strange."

Looks like the personality exchange has ended. Towards what Aoki said about his recovery, Taichi just replied to his words without really thinking about it. He didn't even know what he was talking about.

He was just startled.

His mind was still occupied by the shadows of Nagase [Aoki].

With no expressions at all while plainly contemplating philosophical ideas and interpreting them, Nagase was very different from her usual self.

What did Nagase actually want him to know?

It was because of her calm demeanour that made her call seem like a tragic cry... that was what Taichi thought, but thoughts don't always reflect reality; after all, there were some things that he knew... and some that he didn't

.

He was not able to comprehend what Nagase meant.

Nevertheless, he wanted to understand.

## Chapter 5 - Jobber's Reflection

It was the following Monday and the first lesson had ended and recess had arrived. Yaegashi Taichi tried to calmly discuss Nagase Iori's strange behaviour with Inaba Himeko.

He thought that if he seemed too serious, it would be troublesome for Iori. So he tried to speak about it lightheartedly. But Inaba listened determinedly.

"Oh... Has it become like that?"

Inaba held her chin against her hand and said profoundly.

"What do you mean by becoming like 'that'?"

"That is that... Seriously, I had hoped it wouldn't get lost in the middle."

"And just what do you mean by 'getting lost in the middle'?"

"~ Getting lost in the middle is getting lost in the middle! Use your brain! Or ask her yourself!"

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Inaba crazily pushed Taichi forward. Taichi stepped on the air a few times, then he fixed his vision on Iori who was just standing up.

With a smile filled with satisfaction, Iori jumped up and down and then directly hopped beside Taichi.

"Hm? What's the matter? Anything fun?"

"Nope, nothing... By the way, Iori, about the thing that you talked about last Saturday when we were heading back home..."

"What? Anything wrong?"

Iori had an impeccable smile stretched across her face, pretending she didn't know a thing of what Taichi was talking about.

Seeing that smile caused a bit of dizziness, and Taichi started to feel that what he questioned in his mind was maybe some sort of misunderstanding. Maybe it was just a production from a sudden impulse she had, he thought

"Ah... No, nothing."

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There wasn't anything worth worrying about, Taichi concluded, and he closed the topic... Inaba, who was behind him, deliberately clicked her tongue, seemingly out of disgust, as if wanting Taichi to hear her dissatisfaction.



Today was another typical boring day in the midst of September. After the fifth lesson had ended and recess had begun, a dangerous atmosphere had ramped up in class 1C.

As usual, everyone was pleasantly chatting or playing. Despite playing amongst themselves, they sometimes would glance at a specific point in the classroom.

At that point, or what they called the death zone, sat Inaba. Being reckoned unanimously as the cause of the deadly atmosphere, Inaba was spreading an aura that

said, "I'm very angry. Don't come close to me. If you do, I can't be sure of what I'll do to you." (Of course she didn't say it out loud.)

If you were to have the slightest contact with the death zone, explosions might be induced. Therefore, we had to treat the situation with utmost care.

"Say, Inaba. Don't just put that dirty look on your face."

Nagase rocked her chair in front of Inaba.

Her guts and bold actions astounded her classmates.

"It's getting serious!" "That's too impetuous!" "Iori... You are such a marvelous person." "Gosh! What was the bomb squad doing!"

Divergent words spread in all corners of the classroom. Nagase's unexpected actions caused the soft whispers to amplify.

On that note, the 'bomb squad' should be alluding to Taichi, who was standing near ground zero... In fact, Taichi was pushed forward by the person who spoke of him.

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What happened was simple. At the start of the fifth lesson (classics), Inaba Himeko and Aoki Yoshifumi exchanged personalities. During the lesson, Aoki [Inaba] fell into a deep sleep in the classroom of 1C. When the teacher found out, he whacked the textbook on Inaba's head, thus making a 'bam' sound. When he woke up, Inaba's personality had returned to [Inaba's body]. This is what happened. (Though it's uncertain whether the recovery occurred when she was asleep or at the moment she was hit.)

"Me... being whacked on the head by a mere teacher? That's so humiliating!"

Who does Inaba think she was? I really wanted to question her once and for all.

"Calm down, Inaban. You have to understand that some things can only be accepted. What you can do is to hold this anger and thrash it onto the culprit."

"Nagase, you know that's a death sentence for Aoki, right?"

"You're right. Fufufu... the price he needs to pay is very high."

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Inaba grinned with an audacious smile, then stuck out her tongue and licked her upper lips.

Her ferocious criminal look caused moans in the classroom.

"Eeeeh!" "Calm her down, quick!" "It's okay, she won't hurt us!" "Is the bomb squad doing anything at all?"

It looked like everyone became interested in what would happen.

"I think I just heard some malicious crap..."

Becoming aware of the murmuring, Inaba swung her head to look around the classroom.

"It's just your imagination, Inaba!"

To safeguard the prestige of the bomb squad, Taichi stopped Inaba.

Right at that moment, the bell rang, signaling the end of the recess and the start of the sixth lesson (class meeting). At the same time, the supervisor, Gotou

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Ryuzen, rushed into the classroom. He looked a bit different. Usually, he would have come a bit late due to his laziness.

"Oi! Go back to your seats already!"

Gotou clearly urged the students to return to their seats. After Taichi and Nagase said goodbye to Inaba, who still had a dirty look, they returned to their own seats.

Seemingly without reason, Gotou cleared his throat with a few coughs. His presence felt really weird.

"Eh... Okay, listen well."

Gotou's tone was strangely formal. As if he had already prepared a speech, he announced,

"I think some of you know this, but our school regularly holds voluntary cleaning activities in small areas. Because almost nobody participates actively, in most cases, the sports clubs take turns doing it. But because of coming competitions and itinerary planning failures, we are short of participants. In our staff meeting, we decided to choose three students from three of the first and second year classes to participate in this

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mandatory cleaning activity. Third years are excluded because they have exams."

Though a strong, uneasy sense of foreboding was bubbling, the students of class 1C still held onto the slightest hope and waited for Gotou to continue.

"Then, to decide which three classes would be chosen, we held a game of rock-paper-scissors. Because in the game, I, your teacher, beautifully..."

Gotou slowly looked around the whole classroom, wasting a lot of time to keep the listeners in suspense.

"...lost..."

"You peabrain!" "How can you lose!" "Why did you keep us in suspense? We can't stand it!"

The corny ending angered the students. From all corners, they vigorously verbally tackled Gotou.

"I didn't lose intentionally! So, our class has to send out three people! You can choose the participants yourselves! Yeah, and don't go on a strike! If you do, the whole class

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will have to participate in the next cleaning activity as a punishment... So, Fujishima, help me finish this! Gather in front of the gate after school!"

Gotou flew out of the classroom right after he finished speaking.

"Tea, Teacher?"

The president of class 1C, Fujishima Maiko, felt nervous and puzzled after being called on so suddenly.

"Hey, he got away!" "He abdicated his duties!" "Is he even a teacher?!"

The students complained one after another. However, the complaints could only reverberate in the vacuum of the classroom, as Gotou had already left.

"Ahh... That's that. So for those who want to participate... there should be no one, right? To those who are willing to participate, raise your hands."

Fujishima, despite showing a face full of dissatisfaction and reluctance, still stood in front of the teacher's table to shoulder the responsibility she had been stuffed with.

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Of course, no one raised their hands. Only those who had psychological problems would actively participate in a non-profitable and bothersome activity like this.

"You should go." "Sorry, I'm very busy in my club." "By the way, everyone in our school has their own clubs, right?" "Sport clubs usually help in these occasions. Maybe the cultural clubs can help this time?" "That has no relationship with our problem now, right?" Although everyone found different excuses, in the end, they only wanted to shirk their responsibilities.

Fujishima originally planned to seriously consider what everyone thought, but because of the huge dispute, she gave up her idea.

"Phew... Then let's discuss how to decide our participants. If we still can't grab enough people, we will decide this with game of rock-paper-scissors."

"Hey, are you going to give up your duties as class president?" The students threw away their problems and started to criticise Fujishima.

"Yes, yes, I understand! I'll be one of the three. We'll need two more. Is this okay?"

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It certainly is Fujishima. Everyone began to applaud this time—the attitude of the students surely changed quickly.

By the way, Fujishima is an impressive person... it's important to keep in mind that Fujishima has a side to her personality other than making Iori afraid.

Then Taichi started to contemplate.

If only the volunteer work were a bit more interesting.. . But however I put it, no one would be willing to participate in these cleaning activities. Then, it makes sense that shirking responsibilities are inevitable.

If we were to decide by means of discussion, people who are weaker will most likely be forced to participate.

In this case, we would have to decide by a game of rock-paper-scissors. Now if we chose someone who has important things to do during that time, it would only cause more trouble for that person. Or maybe someone will suggest that those who have really important things on their schedule can be exempt from these duties. But most likely, another fight would occur when such an subjective rule is discussed.

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If we continue on like this, someone will have a headache, no matter what kind of measure is introduced.

Either way, there should be a way to prevent it from happening, isn't that right? Taichi thought of a way... Though it was a way that he already knew from the start

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The way was simple and innocent.

Through this way, everything would be solved.

Of course, we were still left with one more person. But at least we can save one.

Taichi huffed. He closed his eyes and rose his right hand.

"I volunteer."

—But his voice was not quite right. He instantly noticed this.

He opened his eyes.

His distance from the teacher table... No, his own sitting position had changed.

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This implies that—

"Ah, umm...So [Inaba-san] is willing to participate, right?"

Fujishima asked with an unbelievable expression on her face.

Taichi and the others were already quite used to the personality exchange, so even during the most shocking of recent exchanges, he could still confront it calmly. But back on topic, the timing of the exchange this time was too accurate, right?

Taichi turned his head to confirm for himself, that is, where [Yaegashi Taichi] sat.

"I... I also volunteer."

With taut cheeks, [Taichi], most likely being Inaba, pointed downwards from her chest with the middle finger of her left hand and raised her right hand straight up.

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After coming back to the classroom and getting scolded by the angry students, Gotou announced the dismissal of the class meeting.

"I can understand why Yaegashi Taichi joined, but is Inaba a person that would do such things?" "Inaba-san is really weird today right?" "To put it correctly, those guys seem a bit weird recently."

In the buzzing classroom, Taichi [Inaba] was beside Inaba [Taichi] to discuss what just happened.

"Ah... Enough already! Today really sucks."

Inaba [Taichi] was infuriated, but she thought of the situation in the classroom and complained in a lowly voice.

"Um... About that, as I have said before, I'm really sorry. This time, just blame the 'personality exchange' that miraculously occurred right when I raised my hands ."

"Right, including the exchange with Aoki, the timing of today's personality exchange was quite malicious. Still, I am angry at you."

Inaba [Taichi] stared at Taichi with vicious eyes.

Taichi thought it was quite fresh. He didn't expect his body could exude such daring.

"I will find a chance to repay you. Please, let me go this time."

"Hmph. How should I get my revenge?"

Instead of agreeing with compensation, Inaba seemed to look more forward on how to return the loss... She was that wicked.

"Okay, okay. [Taichi], please don't angrily stare at her. If you do, you will become suspicious! Here, smile."

Iori, who seemed to have another motive apart from what she had said, pleasantly pinched Inaba's [Taichi's] cheeks, as if trying to make a smile out of her expression.

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"What? This looks kind of strange and ill. Right! This is because Taichi is a person who doesn't usually smile."

"Then stop it please. Nobody benefits from this."

Looking at someone else playing with [his] face, Taichi was a bit embarrassed and felt acidulous.

"Jokes aside, Fujishima seems to be looking at us right now."

Inaba [Taichi] warned her while Iori was still rubbing her cheeks by Iori. Taichi [Inaba] turned to look back. Fujishima was standing there with her hands crossed and her eyes fixed on them.

Though Fujishima was usually gentle and friendly, her expression now was extremely scary.

Fujishima pushed Taichi and Inaba out of the classroom to do work. Nagase went to the clubroom after leaving some words, 'You guys go and pick up that trash diligently, bye ~ '.

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The three left their belongings in the classroom and gathered at the front door. Fujishima went in front and the other two followed behind her.

On the way, Inaba [Taichi] lightly poked Taichi's [Inaba's] abdomen with her arm, and inquired lowly,

"Is Fujishima that unfriendly to you all the time?"

"Yeah. Since the first time my personality exchanged with Iori. The resulting turmoil from that event caused this condition."

"I understand. To get frantically touched by a strange male classmate isn't something easy to get over. Besides, Fujishima seems to have that peculiar taste [5] and has a crush on Nagase. It is understandable for her to have a crush on Nagase after seeing her, 'naive' and pretty, rubbing her breasts alone. Nevertheless, for her to take you as her rival for Nagase may be quite interesting after all."

"This isn't interesting at all."

Fujishima suddenly turned her head to Taichi and Inaba.

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"Inaba, can I borrow Taichi for a minute?"

"Oh, what's the—" Right when Taichi [Inaba] wanted to reply,

"What's the matter?" Inaba [Taichi] loudly interrupted him.

Inaba [Taichi] potently hit Taichi [Inaba] with her elbow, and walked towards Fujishima with big steps. On her way, she incessantly looked back to Taichi and mouthed "You idiot".

That was so close... It was just impossible to not respond when my name was called for.

On the other hand, Inaba was much more brilliant. She even helped others to remedy their mistakes while not making any herself. Such a helping hand was Inaba indeed.

"I've been curious about this, so I'll just say it—What's the relationship between Iori and Taichi?"

"Eh...?" Taichi [Inaba], who listened at their backs, was stunned and speechless.

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To ask questions directly without beating around the bush, and to neglect the people around who might hear her—she was Fujishima, a venerable person.

"Oi. You guys seem to be quite attached today. And also, on that day, you even took Iori away with you..."

"Even if you ask me what relationship we are in..."

Though Inaba [Taichi] spoke hesitantly and turned around to look at Taichi, she seemed to have thought of something and showed a face of sudden hope.

Despite the hopeful face, what Taichi could see was only desperation.

"It certainly is a relationship between a boy and a girl!"

...She was brave.

"You are lying."

...And her lie was instantly seen through.

"What the... How did you know I was lying?"

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"Don't underestimate me. Once you reach the same level as me, you would know whether a girl had been touched by a boy with just your eyes."

Fujishima's unfathomable potential sent a chill down my spine as she reset her spectacles on her nose, though I am quite hesitant whether to praise her for this.

"Is that so? Then allow me be blunt."

Inaba's [Taichi] emotional murmur was inexplicable.

Taichi wanted to interrupt and cease her words, but it was too late. Besides, even if he tried to deny Inaba, it would not persuade Fujishima if the speaker weren't Taichi himself.

"The relationship between Nagase and I... is close to the relationship between a boy and a girl!"

"Close... I'm surprised. This may be a crisis!"

"This is the case, so please don't go near Nagase!"

"That was what I have to say to somebody who frantically touches a girl's body..."

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"Alright, stop! Please!"

Taichi [Inaba] squeezed between the two of them to end their topic in order to prevent anything dangerous from happening.

Inaba [Taichi] clicked discontentedly with her tongue while Fujishima snorted.

Taichi could only sigh to their responses.

A teacher was (reluctantly) explaining to the students gathered at the front of the door what there was to do. Essentially, the goal was to collect a set amount of trash near the school. If anyone was found collecting trash from the trash bins to meet their quota, they would be severely punished. After explaining, she ordered the students to distribute amongst themselves a pair of work gloves and a trash bag (and some even had a long picker for collecting rubbish). The students were off to work after that.

Because Fujishima went into action with her friends from other classes, Taichi and Inaba were left to themselves as they proceeded outside school.

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Under a clear bright sky, the two were wandering around in an oddly spacious park near the school.

"Arghh... Am I on a date with you collecting trash?"

Inaba [Taichi] clanged the trash she held in mid-air with her hands and lazily muttered.

Indeed, the bright weather was very suitable for walking. If the fact that they had to collect trash was excluded (though this is inevitable), they seemed to be on a date.

"This can't be helped. I—"

Instantly, the scene became pitch black and his position had changed—or had switched back. Taichi's personality returned to [Taichi's body] while Inaba's personality returned to [Inaba's body]—everything was back to normal.

"...Returning back to my body with this strange timing? Life sucks... Oh, so, Taichi, give me the trash picker."

Inaba complained angrily and snatched the trash picker from Taichi's hands.

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"Please don't mind."

"How can I not mind it? Thanks to you, my image, which I used half a year to establish, was pulverized in just a few hours."

"The way you end your sentence sounds just like the Spanish tone used to present the wrestlers when Japan broadcasts American Professional Wrestling."

"Could you not use a metaphor that no one would understand? You fool."

Even though I knew how stupid the metaphors were, sometimes I can't stop myself from saying them.

"But letting others know the other sides of you, such as when you sleep, and showing that you are actually a good person... Won't that make you more popular instead?"

"I don't count on that. It's only leverage for my enemies to take advantage of—this infuriates me."

"Who are your enemies?"

"Basically, everyone except myself."

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Inaba grinned boldly, said "Oh, I found a large target", used the trash picker to clip the target and threw it into her trash bag. The target seemed to be a crushed monthly magazine drenched in the rain.

"Your definition of 'enemies' is quite unpleasant, but first putting that aside... What the hell happened when you talked with Fujishima! Can you please speak in euphemism? I don't want to make enemies with anyone in class."

Taichi emphasized his words, but Inaba just snorted in reply.

"Hey, it's fine if you don't thank me, but I don't remember doing anything that deserves your blame! Didn't I set up an explicit opposition with Fujishima? If you work hard, I bet you could save Iori from Fujishima's evil hands."

"I don't get what you mean."

"What you are saying? Isn't this situation suitable for you? Right—"

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Inaba temporarily stopped herself and met her eyes with Taichi. Her eyes were filled with sympathy, compassion, gratefulness, anger and anxiety. If Taichi hadn't guess wrong, there was also a bit of enviousness.

She then continued to speak,

"—You are a fool who loves to sacrifice himself."

"...What do you mean by a fool who loves to sacrifice himself?"

Taichi did not quite understood what Inaba meant. Although he didn't understand, he started to have some trouble breathing.

"It is what it literally means. Aren't my wordings very exact?"

Inaba tilted her head at Taichi, and spoke confidently.

"I don't find it exact in any way—"

"Then let me ask you, why would you voluntarily join this nasty activity?"

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"...Because no one wanted to do it, but someone had to. If I took the job, then others would not be forced to join—"

"Why didn't you put yourself inside the group of people you call 'others'? Surely you didn't actually want to do it either? Such being the case, aren't you the one being forced to join?"

"Well...."

Taichi was speechless. He wanted to say something but he couldn't find the words he wanted. Those words must have hidden deep in a foggy space.

"You certainly are a fool who likes to sacrifice himself. Why can't you consider yourself as you consider others? Why do you have to treat yourself so differently? Oh, I do not mean that you are looking at yourself as more sublime, but as the opposite—you disdain yourself so you think that it's no big deal to sacrifice yourself. I can't understand why anyone would not treasure themselves. I am even disgusted by this."

Inaba used words that had more bite, relentlessly slashing them onto Taichi.

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"Why do you like professional wrestling?"

Inaba suddenly switched their topic.

Though it was sudden, it was something he loved; therefore, he answered directly and fluently.

"If I were to explain why to someone who isn't familiar with wrestling, the reason should be 'the beauty to receive'. Since pro wrestling is a performance run from a script, it's not a fight with two opponents competing for their lives. On the contrary, this is a performance to attract the audience and 'compete with the audience'. Wrestling is not only about having a strong side with magnificent skills, but also about needing a side to 'receive' those strong attacks. Whether the skills or the competition would be attractive to the audience, or whether the competition would have a remarkable finish, hinges mainly on the side who 'receives' those attacks. The form of professional wrestling could be complete only when a side receives attacks. I especially like those whose job is to act as losers, hence their name, 'jobbers'. If I were to speak of the advantages according to their losing faces—"

"Shut up, you disgraceful pro wrestling otaku."

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Inaba rudely lashed out at Taichi without any attempt of veiling her scorn towards him.

"I-It's you who told me..."

"No one told you to explain it in such detail, you disgraceful pro wrestling otaku."

She repeated her voice of dissatisfaction in disdain.

"Y-You don't have to repeat 'disgraceful pro wrestling otaku' twice..."

"So what I mean is that what you call 'the beauty to receive', if implemented on you, should be called 'the beauty of self-sacrificing'."

"Inaba, you are not quite right, 'the beauty to receive' is  
—"

"Don't get me wrong. I am not referring to regular professional wrestling, but just your case."

"My case isn't either..."

Was it because I was being overwhelmed by Inaba's forcible attitude that caused my indistinct reply...? Or was it because she understood the crux of the matter?

"Hmph, this is hard to say."

Inaba sighed, looked down on the floor, picked up an empty lunchbox and threw it into her trash bag. I was uncertain whether it was because she had already finished saying what she had wanted to.

Compared to Inaba, who has been successfully picking up trash from the beginning, Taichi's trash bag was still completely empty.



"Then, back to the topic... You like Iori, right?"

"Arghh!"

Taichi couldn't stop himself from puffing.

"Your responses have became quite exaggerated. Back then, you were a person with no emotions."

'Gwahaha'—Inaba held her belly while laughing. It was obvious she had known Taichi would respond in such way when she asked.

"I'm only forced to do so! Besides, what topic did you go back to? You didn't go back to any topic at all."

"What I mean is to encourage you to get Iori as quick as possible before she gets snatched by Fujishima."

"How did it end up like this? I don't understand the significance of competing with Fujishima. And before that, 'I must get Nagase' was already a strange topic."

"Don't you understand? Among the five members of the Cultural Research Club, the weakest person is Iori! I've never seen someone as unstable as her."

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The scene of when I chatted with Nagase [Aoki] flashed in my mind. Expressing that many emotions in such a short period of time... Was she full with emotions, or was she unstable?

"Also, you like those who are weak, right? After all, you must be the one who becomes the wall who stands upon the wind, the man who endures the wounds he's received to protect his companion. If you don't, she might go crazy! To someone who's devoted to self-sacrifice, she is the best choice ever."

"...You should not decide things yourself, Inaba. I haven't even thought about those things."

I acknowledge that Inaba is smarter than me, but it is I who knows the most about myself, so it was unreasonable of her to criticise me with her imagination.

"This is hard to say—" Inaba spoke lowly, and twisted her trash picker around.

"It was Taichi who didn't understand, so things got worse. Also, let me first tell you, Iori also likes Taichi."

"No, that can't be possible."

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Taichi calmly responded with a sharp-tongue response

"Tsk, your response is so boring. You should have been better the second time."

Inaba would set up these strange rules.

"I don't care! It was only Inaba making things up."

"You're quite rude, you know? I, of course, have real evidence to support such a claim. That girl Iori needs some support! She needs to confirm her own existence whenever anything happens. Isn't this just perfect for you, the disgusting fool who wishes to sacrifice everything for the sake of others? Taichi, it's because of your broken and distorted worldview that make you and Iori fit. It's the same rationale that the cogs in gears match up and work together, right?"

She's gone too far.

"You've gone too far—"

"Besides, you have the most vitality when you are with Iori."

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This was the only line where Inaba turned her eyes away and rudely spat.

"Is that so?"

She was speaking with such snark and bite that when she started to speak normally, it was genuinely surprising.

"Anything is fine for me. This is a problem between you and Iori; do whatever you guys like. It has nothing to do with me.

"It was only a little bit of meddling in your business—" It occurred to Inaba too that this type of line didn't match her, so she quickened her walking pace after commenting embarrassedly.

Though she was the type who would recklessly and bluntly tell others her thoughts in jest, this was the first time that Inaba's words were burnt deeply into his memory. This had something to do with the personality exchange somehow.

"But I still think that—" Inaba murmured worriedly. And that together with her grand posture made her seem like a mismatched mosaic.

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"Iori is in the most danger."

"Danger... What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, in this 'personality exchange', Iori seems to be the most likely person to have their psyche destroyed. And the person who will experience the most negative impacts is her."

She spoke frankly.

"Negative impacts from the personality exchange? Certainly there would be problems, but isn't getting destroyed too serious? We don't know exactly when big problems will arise, but so far it's only been a nuisance. Should we take it that seriously? After all, the personality exchange only stays for two hours, and in most cases, much less. If we take it as it is, it's really not something that serious, or at least we haven't seen anything serious until now."

Taichi replied easily without much thought.

"You are such an idiot!"

Inaba angrily scolded him with a tone filled with derision.

She drooped her head and stopped moving. She quivered agitatedly while she continued.

"Are you serious? How can you act as if it was nothing to you? It's unmistakable: the dullest and most slow-witted person of us is you, Taichi. Maybe it's because you are a self-sacrificing idiot that you're unresponsive to pain. But our condition now is the most serious—a crisis that is filled with absolute desperation! Anyone could get hurt or destroyed at any time, anywhere or by anything. Do you not realize this? In this personality exchange, there is nothing that is not serious or unimportant!"

Inaba lifted her head and harshly stared at Taichi with her long and fine eyes, as if wanting to kill him.

Inaba gets angry easily, but she never gets so angry that she would drown in her emotions with anger transcending her sanity.

But right now, Inaba was exactly that.

This was an indication of her extreme anger. It was reasonable, however; she had remarked that the situation was a case of complete desperation, and even gave out a warning. Nevertheless, Taichi still spoke mindlessly like an idiot.

My past self once reckoned the personality exchange as a condition that was very dangerous. I did have the chance to think like Inaba, but maybe it was because I wanted to persuade myself to think optimistically that I would say such naïve and dumb words.

"...Sorry, Inaba." Taichi spontaneously spoke the words of apology.

Inaba smiled wryly with an embarrassed expression on her face.

"Ahhh... No, I should be the one to apologise. It seems that I've gone too far today. My mood wasn't good after all the things that have happened to me... sorry."

Inaba locked her lips and looked at Taichi insecurely. Her eyebrows emphasized her melancholy.

She murmured with an unsteady voice, as if she was afraid of something.

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"Are you willing to... forgive me?"

Inaba appeared timid and weak, much different from her usual self.

Taichi's heartbeat accelerated due to Inaba's unimaginable figure, but still, he managed to squeeze his words out,

"...There wasn't anything to be sorry about or to be forgiven for. Besides, I think what Inaba said was quite right... Hey, it doesn't matter, you don't have to get so worried."

Hearing Taichi's comforting words, Inaba eased off, loosened up her cheeks and had a natural and comfortable expression that was enough to puzzle Taichi deep in his heart.

"Right, we must get going! If we just stay here, we'll never finish our duties."

Taichi was a bit embarrassed. He advanced forward without looking at Inaba.

"—You surely are a dull and slow-witted person."

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Inaba's murmur was carried to Taichi's ear by the wind.

"Because... you didn't even notice that your trash bag had already flown away."

"...Eh?"

Taichi looked at his hands.

The trash bag that should have been in his work-gloved hand was gone.

"...Inaba, do you know when it flew away?"

Inaba smiled coyly as if feeling jovial deep down in her heart.

"It was at the moment when I said 'You like Iori, right?' and Taichi went 'Arghh!'"

"Wasn't that a long time ago? Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Because... it's more interesting this way."

Inaba, who always maliciously teases others for fun like a sadist, stood there plainly.

## Chapter 6 - Low Blow's Most Powerful Theory

A few days after the voluntary cleaning activity, we follow our main characters back to the Cultural Research Club clubroom. There, we have Yaegashi Taichi who had transferred to [Himeko Inaba] and Yoshifumi Aoki who had transferred to [Kiriyama Yui].

Both of them now had mischievous smiles as they enjoyed watching the video they had just taken on the phone.

On the screen of the phone...

"I, I... can't keep acting cruel anymore... Actually, my heart... my heart has deeply fallen for Aoki, sorry... for saying such words all of a sudden..."

[Kiriyama] spoke the line with gleaming eyes.

"I, I, eh... I, my heart... eh, actually... I really love you... If you are willing to... please... go out with me."

[Inaba] lowered her head in embarrassment.

The girl members of the Cultural Research Club went out to mind their affairs. (To be accurate, the members

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who have work to do should be Iori Nagase, Taichi and Aoki; but now Kiriyama was in [Taichi's body] and Inaba in [Aoki's]. Having switched to the [two girls], the male members were now carrying out a plan to reveal what the girls wanted to say using their bodies. This stupid plan was, of course, thought up by Aoki.

"Arghh, this is terrific! [Inaba] is incisive, boyish, apathetic and displeasing to most students... but when she confesses embarrassingly like a young teenage girl... this disparity is just so... moe!"

Though it was embarrassing for Taichi to have acted like that, Aoki seemed to like Taichi's acting skills.

"Aoki, you... completely conveyed your innermost wishes."

"Right! Ahhh~~I wish that one day she would speak these words herself."

Aoki [Kiriyama] murmured. In the eyes of Taichi, it was miraculous to hear such words from [Kiriyama].

"By the way, Aoki. You sure are faithful to Kiriyama."

Aoki neither lost his heart nor did he become desperate when treated ruthlessly. To be frank, I really respect him in this regard.

"Yeah, I was mesmerized by her for no reason... No, there must be some reason behind this! For example, she's cute, lively, pure and childish. When something comes in her mind, she will act regardless of the consequences. Also, she's a tsundere."

Her being a tsundere was more like Aoki's wish rather than the truth.

"But my instincts are the most important! That's why I said I was mesmerized."

Aoki [Kiriyama] nodded while he spoke of his love towards Kiriyama.

"Anyways, I'm happy now. Let's delete those videos."

Having heard Taichi's [Inaba's] words, Aoki [Kiriyama] quickly interjected with an "Oi!!", shrugging his shoulders like those Americans actors in comedy movies.

"We've only just begun."

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Aoki [Kiriymama] smiled evilly.

"But..."

"Are we going to stop now?"

Aoki forcibly persuaded Taichi to shoot their first video, but for no apparent reason, Aoki [Kiriymama] stopped being as persuasive as he was before and seemed to be waiting for something... No, or rather, he seemed to be hurrying Taichi by starting to hum a song.

"...If you insist, then it's fine with me."

That being said, Taichi felt like he was losing something important in humanity.

Their spirits had become crazy when they began to film themselves again. In theory, they should have sufficient time to enjoy themselves before everyone came back. Nevertheless, the two got carried away.

They were too careless.

The door creaked.

[Taichi] and [Aoki] came back earlier than expected. (If there was no swapping around since their last contact, Kiriyama and Inaba should be [Taichi] and [Aoki] respectively.)

Seeing their arrival, Taichi [Inaba] and Aoki [Kiriyama] froze immediately.

What they had just said shouldn't have been heard, so if they treated this calmly they should have been able to get away with it. Nevertheless, they completely lost their senses (because they were so agitated they forgot about this already).

A few seconds of silence were inevitable.

Besides, the newly arriving two members of the Cultural Research Club were not so naïve as to waste those few seconds.

"Yui! Grab that phone."

Inaba [Aoki] immediately directed her.

"Hand it to me!"

There was immense change in physique when she switched to another body—Kiriyama [Taichi] numbly ran to Aoki [Kiriyama].

"Yikes!"

Aoki [Kiriyama] yelped, shrinking himself down. In a blink of an eye, Kiriyama [Taichi] had already snatched his phone and handed it to Inaba [Aoki].

"Let me see what you have done with my phone... Eh?  
A video huh..."

In the silent clubroom, the only sounds came from the video that was taken by the phone, and it reverberated in the room.

Corny lines continuously flew into the silent room.

Taichi looked at Inaba [Aoki], only to see her emotionless as she stood stone still. He even could hear her blood vessels ripping apart... that, of course, was only his imagination.

"Hehe... Looks like you've played a pretty interesting game."

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While speaking, Inaba [Aoki] took off her sweater, loosened her tie, and unbuckled the buttons on her shirt. While everyone was still gasping in awe, she threw her shirt away and took off her undershirt. Leaving her upper body naked, she started to move her hands towards the belt on her pants.

"Wa-wait. What are you doing?"

Kiriyama [Taichi] finally screamed. He already had a red flushed face.

"What am I doing? I just want to run naked around the school for some air."

"You, you're kidding, right? Inaba?"

Taichi [Inaba] felt flabbergasted at Inaba's idea of vengeance.

"Who knows whether I'm kidding or not... fufufu."

"Stop, please stop, Inaba! If you do that, [I] would be dead for sure!"

"That's right, Inaba. However you do it, a death penalty seems a bit too much..."

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Even if she was Inaba, she should still have a little conscience—

"Die."

—Seems like she doesn't have any conscience at all.

"Please, I beg you, Inaba-san! I can't live on with this body anymore if you do this!"

Aoki kneeled down in front of Inaba, however, it was surprising enough to see [Kiriyama] kneel down to [Aoki].

"Shut up! This is your punishment for doing those humiliating things with [my body]!"

In the end, after a bit of persuasion, the three (after all, since this was crucial, Kiriyama also leaned towards Taichi and Aoki's side) finally stopped Inaba, who was still angry.

When the atmosphere in the clubroom settled, everyone returned to their [bodies] (Should I say that they calmed down because Inaba returned to her [own body]).

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"You... if you do it again, you will meet your fate."

"Yes, we are really sorry, Inaba-san."

Taichi and Aoki bowed to apologise.

"On top of that, I'm also angry. If I find you doing this next time, I'll teach you a lesson using violence."

Kiriyama smiled (or at least pretended to).

"Yes, yes... I understand."

Taichi was scared. If Kiriyama was serious, I might even have to go to the hospital, he thought.

"This feels strange, but I actually want to be taught a lesson!"

Aoki still spoke mindlessly.

"...Ah, right. There is something I'm quite aware of. Could it be that..."

Aoki hesitated as if it were hard to speak, but he then managed to continue.

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"Could it be that Yui is afraid of us? When I became [Yui], if we... or rather, if boys come close to me, I felt that my [body] would quiver."

Taichi couldn't fully understand what Aoki meant. He tilted his head and said "Eh?"

Nevertheless...

Aoki's words seem to have hit the core of the matter.

Kiriyama froze with her face white.

Her eyes were focused and still.

She didn't even blink.

She was like a doll with broken strings.

Then, Kiriyama jumped up as if she were suddenly plugged in. She squeezed out a smile and some words as if she had mechanical problems.

"...Ah... Eh? How could that happen... Would I even be scared of people like you? Stop kidding! That's because... I'm very strong! I'm stronger than you people... so... so, I don't fear boys."

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However, no matter who had heard her say that, they would know that it was the inversion of the truth.

Kiriyama held her shoulder with her hand to stifle her shiver, which, from what I perceive, was because of the winter's freezing weather. At the same time, she gripped on to her long chestnut hair and her white shirt with the same hand, rubbing those colours together. Her hair was firmly grasped in her hand.

Moving slightly forwards, her hair fell over her head in a way that completely veiled her facial expressions. Her body seemed even smaller than usual.

Seeing that girl unfortunate and alone, Taichi knew he had to do something... something, he must do.

But until now, he never knew the side Kiriyama showed now had ever existed.

Kiriyama had never shown such expressions... No, maybe it was I who had never seen them. Maybe it was I who didn't care.

"Sorry!"

Aoki suddenly stood up and apologised with a large bow.

"We've known each other for some time now, and even though I said I love you, if it weren't for this strange phenomenon, I wouldn't even know how you felt... Maybe I hurt you too much... I... I am the worst bastard!"

He said with all his might and generosity.

Kiriyama abruptly lifted her head.

Her usual ambitious and strong eyes were filled with tears; her eyebrows were clenched painfully. Her tousled hair stuck to her bud-like cerise lips.

She met her eyes with Inaba, Aoki and Taichi, in that order, respectively.

Confirming their expressions, she then escaped.

She turned her body suddenly, letting her chestnut hair and her skirt fly around; she used the elastic force accumulated on her legs and sprinted to the door. No one had the time to stop her.

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"Yui!"

Though a bit slow, Aoki still shouted and began to chase her.

Inaba, however, put her right hand in front of Aoki to stop him.

"Inaba?"

"It was nice of you to spot this, though, you should have considered the timing of your words before you spoke them... Either way, from what I've observed just now, the timing was insignificant... Or I may as well say, that kind of feeling will sink into the [body]. Even though I knew it, I didn't really have that feeling when I was [Yui]. So was it a problem of her body? Aoki, you don't think much, but you sure are sensitive to your feelings."

Inaba mumbled while scratching her head with her other hand.

"Inaba, you knew this? Then why did Kiriyama..."

Taichi inquired to Inaba to learn more, even though he was led by his nose all along.

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"It would be rather strange if we didn't notice it... though this may sound cruel to you guys. After all, she veiled it meticulously. It's impossible to think of such things just from our usual communication... though, eventually I found out. In fact, her problem is quite serious! Ah, I don't want to explain too much. If you want to know more, ask her yourself."

"Say... can you first let me go?"

Aoki pushed away Inaba's hand and tried to get past her.

"Leave it. Even if you go now, I doubt you can do anything. Yui is the agitated type. It'll be better if I go and calm her down a bit instead of you stimulating her recklessly."

They stared at each other for a few seconds, but in the end, he relented.

"...I understand... my hopes are on you, Inaba."

"All I can do now is comfort her, you'll have to think of what to do later... Taichi, you're included as well."

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"I, I know."

Taichi nodded in consent, although he was a bit afraid of Inaba's cold stare.

Inaba stared at him doubtfully for a while and then took her phone and left the clubroom.

With her back to them, she spoke to Taichi and the others.

"I knew somebody would get hurt... No, actually, it depends on the person."

Inaba closed the door after that.

Only Taichi and Aoki were left in the clubroom.

"Ah... I'm fed up with my stupidity... my slow-wittedness is starting to infuriate me... Waa, I think I'm going to hate myself... I can't believe Yui had that feeling all along... Why didn't I notice until now... I only found out because of my exchange with [Yui]... This is breaking the rules."

Aoki sloppily stuck his face on the table, mourning.

"Some things are inevitable. Besides, she veiled it so brilliantly that it even earned Inaba's praise... Or I may as well say... even when I become [Kiriyama], I didn't notice this... How could that be?"

"Ayahh, it also depends on the time and place of the exchange. I just noticed it vaguely. Ahhh... though it's true literally..."

Taichi and the others discovering Kiriyama's secret may cause huge changes in the world. Perhaps, if we had remained ignorant, it would've been better. Taichi had this thought for a moment, but then quickly decided that it was wrong.

Since he was Kiriyama's friend, this secret would have been unveiled one day or another in any random form. It is impossible not to confront it. The problem is when it would happen. In this case, however, the way it was revealed was not ideal.

"But if we think deeper, there surely were oddities! For example, had Taichi ever touched Yui's body or have been touched by her? Of course, it doesn't count when you're in an exchange."

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"...No... right? That's not strange since we are highschool boys and girls."

"Hey, this may not be the case. Take the Cultural Research Club as an example. Inaba, who easily gets crazy or violent, has body contact from time to time. Iori also likes intimate contact... so there are quite a lot of cases?"

Indeed, the members of the Cultural Research Club were very close so there wasn't much of a divide between the boys and the girls. 'Touching and being touched' were trivial things that weren't strange to them.

"In this atmosphere that allows such intimate contact, Yui, who is such a lively girl, didn't do this. Isn't that strange? Furthermore, Yui, an active girl that held steadfast in her feelings, could have replaced the violent role that Inaba played. But she didn't. Isn't that strange or what?"

"Yui is just one who wouldn't fight... No, this isn't right. After all, she had thrown biscuits at me before."

"I also had the 'pillow of oblivion' thrown at me."

This was something that happened at Inaba's house.

"I'm not trying to say that she is normal only if she does those things. I just feel weird when I think deeply about it."

Other than that, there were some other examples that could explain this. For example, when Kiriyama was almost touched by Nagase [Aoki]...

"Aoki... you're quite sensitive."

"Because this has to do with the girl I'm obsessed with!"

Aoki looked bright when he spoke those words.

"Even when this happens, you're just like usual."

Taichi couldn't hold himself from speaking.

"Because it's my way of living! It's OK as long as I'm happy at the moment."

"Your living style is enviable."

"Right!" Aoki childishly smiled. This made Taichi smile wryly.

"Hehe, I know what you want to say. After all, after all the personality exchanges and that guy called «Fuusenkazura»... the situation we're in now is unpredictable. So you want to say 'please treat this seriously', right?"

"That line should belong to Inaba, right?"

Let me respond to him with a sharp-tongued response first.

"But I can't treat it seriously because my living style is so good and firm it won't waver from those things."

"But didn't you say that 'your living style that won't waver' is already 'OK when you're happy'?"

"Because my living style represented everything. Whatever I aim for, if I use all my strength to accomplish it, I reckon I've already triumphed."

Aoki's asseveration didn't show any signs of wavering from Taichi's critique.

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"If I can live a life where, when I die, I can still say 'Ah, that was fun', I'll be happy and satisfied. So, if possible, I hope this personality exchange is something that can be handled with a smile. Though this is a wish that may never come true... besides, I've also hurt Yui..."

Could it be that the person in our club who was the closest to reaching the truth of life was Aoki? Of course, Taichi didn't understand the truth, so he couldn't really tell.

Aoki had a sudden realization and shouted.

"Wahh ~ Why did I become so serious all of a sudden? This isn't like me."

"Eh, is Aoki actually a magnificent person? I feel a bit sad about this..."

"Right... Wait, isn't it strange for you to be sad about this?"

"No, because all along I thought Aoki was stupid."

"Taichi, you're too evil... Hey! Ah, is it that?! Being overtaken by someone you have been holding down all

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along... is it that feeling?! Crap, it was only Inaba when it began. How did this happen..."

"Speaking of which, I've also been criticised by Inaba as dismal recently."

"Wasn't it usually like that?"

It was quite unusual that he could speak such lines so fluidly.

"No... It's more dismal than usual, since she pointed out my mistakes in many places..."

"Heh ~ It's extraordinary that Taichi would become dismal. You don't look like the kind of person to get obsessed with small matters. Inaba, however, is quite stern... I can hear you out if you want me to."

With a slight hesitation before accepting his good will, Taichi told him how he was criticised by Inaba as a 'fool who loves to sacrifice himself' (Of course he left out the part about Nagase).

"Ha ~ So that is what happened... Hmm, Ah Is that so? Oh Oh"

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After listening to Taichi, Aoki showed an expression that showed he completely understood what had happened as he nodded his head.

"Ahah ~ I can understand why Inaba would say so! Honestly, 'a fool that loves to sacrifice himself' is actually very suitable. Inaba is really something."

"Even Aoki thinks so..."

Taichi felt that he would actually become depressed.

"Aye. Listen to me, Taichi. I think my living style is fine, though some may think that my living style is crappy and I should cherish much more important things . Nevertheless, whatever they say, I wouldn't change what I do! Or I may as well say, honestly, though I pretended to be cool so I said 'my living style won't waver from such things', to speak the truth, it should be 'impossible to waver' more than 'won't waver' because I'm this kind of a person. Humans change incessantly on the surface; still, our 'nature' won't change so easily even if we want it to. Even when the nature of somebody seems to have changed, it's only a change that's restricted

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to the surface after all. It's just that my nature has a characteristic, which is 'very hard to change on the surface'. That's what it is."

Aoki explained in such an unpredictable way, but at the same time, hit the core of the problem.

Indeed, Aoki didn't seem to change much even when involved in this strange situation. But it was because he didn't change much that his impression seemed to even fluctuate more than normal people.

"Though just now I started to speak of things that I wouldn't normally say, all I want to say is that 'the problem is to understand yourself and learn your own way of living'. Although changing that personality of self-sacrificing is better, there are things that can only be done with that personality, right? Besides, in most cases, it's hard to change even if you want to, right?"

From what I hear, his words seem to mean giving up some things, but the main point of his words had a definite difference from that of giving up.

In other words, we must accept and confront it with our mind; and then, we can advance forward.

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"You... surely are something."

It feels like Aoki had already found something that Taichi and many others must still use a lot of time to discover.

"If you speak about this seriously, I'm going to get embarrassed! Or may I say, I think Taichi is much more magnificent. Speaking of 'potential', you're much ahead with it."

"What kind of potential?"

"Aye. It's because you're so chaste you might not know , but it's true: you're really something! It's because of this that you would attain that nickname, 'a fool that loves to sacrifice himself'. How do I say this... the thing with Yui, I feel that you, Taichi, are more capable of handling it. When I realized that, I was unsure of how to face her... I didn't know what to do..."

What would happen after Taichi and the others learned of the secret that Kiriyama had been trying to hide all this time? Also, how should we act?

"Yeah... What should we do in order to save Kiriyama?"

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"As I was saying... you're really something when things like this happen... this is too much for me! Are you trying to save her radically? I'm already having a headache from how I should deal with my relationship with her."

"No, I wasn't thinking of anything this wonderful..."

"It's because you look like you're really going to do it that makes you so fearful... By the way, if things really happen as you say, will Yui become mesmerised by Taichi? Crap, I feel that things will really happen like that!"

Aoki became agonized by his own delusion.



Personality exchange visited Taichi suddenly, like the way it had been normally.

After dinner, Taichi should have been watching the television aimlessly with his sister in the living room.

He lifted his body, which was lying on the bed, sat himself on the bed, and looked around the room.

His vision was blurry, as if he were submerged in water. He felt something was about to trickle from his nose, so he quickly sucked it back up; at the same time, he realized his cheeks were all wet. He wiped the tears that trickled down his cheeks with the collar of his pink shirt and stifled his tears.

He didn't quite understand, but his chest had an intense squeezing pain.

It looks like he had exchanged his personality with someone again.

The height disparity took some time to get used to. He got off the bed and looked in a heart-shaped, red-bordered mirror that was on a nearby shelf. He peeked at himself in the mirror.

His eyes and nose were red. His chestnut hair seemed to lack the usual lustre and vitality. His face was pale and

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even more childish than usual. The face seemed to invoke people to protect its owner.

[Kiriymama Yui] was inside the mirror.

— Our condition now is the most serious—a crisis that is filled with absolute desperation!

— Anyone could get hurt or destroyed anytime, or anywhere, by anything that could happen.

Inaba's voice started to ring in Taichi's head.

Only now was Taichi forced to reckon with the effects of the personality exchange.

Did Kiriymama cry non-stop after she had arrived home? Did she cease her tears at one point, but was unable to stop herself from crying and bursting into tears again? Or did she cry because of another reason?

Although I have become [Kiriymama] and am crying in her place, I don't even know the reason why I'm crying. Even though we continually undergo exchanges between our bodies and personalities, it does not mean that we could connect our hearts together.

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Taichi wiped his eyes again, laid on the bed, and started to think of what to do. The fluorescent lamp was too bright, so he raised his right hand to block the light rays. Though white, and trained in martial arts, his hands, he knew, were too small to block anything.

The tears that Kiriyama shed alone were tears that weren't supposed to be seen by others, but I felt them with my own body in a way that transcended even the most immersed spy. Was this really all right?

Common sense dictates that this shouldn't be right, because this couldn't happen in normal circumstances.

Nevertheless...

There were also some good things, weren't there?

For example, at least I could bear the pain in her body for her—her chest, her eyes, her nose. Though this was nothing compared to the pain in her heart, still, in theory, she should be better off than if she had to bear this all by herself.

Was what I thought wrong?

People constantly complain about their problems.

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They complain that 'it is all because of this'. They hate what had happened. They dream of a virtual world in which things would not be what they were now. If they brush off their own mistakes and say that it was impossible for them fix, they would be forgiven.

That, however, is just an escape. Giving up is what it is called. Instead of doing something, they avoided facing reality and confronted their problems in their mind only.

However, through our trials, we discover the light inside; this is what we call fighting, isn't it? Moreover, fighting is entirely different from being plainly free and optimistic.

It is different from irresponsibly and optimistically thinking that in the end, things will fix themselves.

We have to try our best to come up with solutions.

If I were to think like this because of my acknowledgement and understanding of despair, would Inaba forgive me?

The phone rang with the tone of a music box.

Taichi pushed himself up to search for the source of the sound. He found a light pink phone on the bed, and quickly grabbed it, confirming the person making the incoming call. The words 'Yaegashi Taichi' were shown on the screen.

He answered the call right away. He had been getting used to hearing his own voice already, but it still felt strange.

"Hey, is that... Are you Taichi?"

That was the voice of 'Yaegashi Taichi'.

"Yes, you're right."

"Maybe you know already, but I'm Kiriyama! And... that... although it seems like I'm crying, I hope you... can ignore it... Actually, please forget it!"

[Taichi]'s sound, which wove his words, sent along Kiriyama's strong will.

It's normal, perhaps even expected, to hope for someone to forget something because it wasn't

something that was meant to be seen. If I can divert my attention from this, then I can pretend to forget this. But what this would create was only false stability.

Taichi did not plan to condemn the deed of trying to gain that kind of stablyness, because this could create a sense of security. If we don't veil certain things, there would be too much in the world for us to bear or overcome.

He understood this point.

Nevertheless...

"It's impossible for me to forget."

Taichi knew the truth must be accepted before a step could be advanced.

The scene of Kiriyama [Taichi] inhaling over the phone was shown clearly upon his eyes.

"Relatively, wouldn't it be better if Kiriyama forgot these tears?"

Taichi continued to speak, but he must think quickly now.

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Although he had not come up with any measures to do 'that thing' yet and simply said what he wished for, it was a decent start.

"What does that mean? What are you trying to say... those dumb words..."

Kiriyama's [Taichi] voice sounded as if she was crying.

"Kiriyama, can we meet a bit later?"

Taichi said he wanted to meet her in person, now that he knew that his words alone wouldn't solve her problems.

Let us advance gradually like this.

We can't confirm what the dark road ahead of us looks like; maybe we will fall and get some cuts and scrapes. Or maybe we will step on air and fall off a cliff.

In spite of this, I still believe that if we advance, light will await us. It surely is something that only a fool would believe in.

Nevertheless, I still certainly wanted to 'save' Kiriyama

.

The time now was eight-thirty at night. The sky had already turned all black.

Because Kiriyama said 'I don't want to meet in crowded places', we decided to meet in a unpopular park that we both knew. The park is somewhere in between our houses and a bit far, but we could still get there with our bikes. Despite the fact that we were heading there from unfamiliar areas, we didn't have a problem figuring out how to get to the park.

A bench, a see-saw, and a sand pit were scattered around the park. The road lamp vaguely lit up these facilities. The park was made as if to fill in the gaps of the nearby housing units, so it wasn't spacious enough for children to play baseball or hide-and-seek here.

During this time, there were almost no pedestrians or cars around, though it hadn't become a gathering place for juvenile delinquents either. This park simply existed there, as if it were long forgotten.

Currently in the park, there were two shadows of people on their bikes.

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They belong to Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriyma Yui, who had exchanged their personalities.

Although Taichi was a bit afraid that she was still crying, Kiriyma [Taichi] had a look of imperturbability. She wore the same clothes Taichi usually wore at home—a crew neck accompanied with a thin blue hooded jacket and sports pants.

"Taichi, sorry... your sister might think this is strange."

Kiriyma [Taichi] commenced.

"Hm, what happened?"

In this timing of the day, being frightened was surely inevitable. After all, it happened when she was crying.

"Because it was sudden... even though it's usually sudden, I was especially frightened this time... so your sister told me, 'Onii-chan<sup>[6]</sup>, you have been acting quite weird lately, is there something wrong? Do you need to get checked-up at the hospital?'

"...It's already at the stage that I 'should go to the hospital'."

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This is bad news, I must think of something to remedy this later.

"Forget it. Let's talk about those things later. Kiriyama  
—"

"Are you going to talk about what happened today?"

Kiriyama [Taichi] interrupted Taichi [Kiriyama].

"Yeah... what happened today."

"Just when Taichi exchanged with me, Aoki phoned me and said he wanted to tell me some things in detail when we met. But then he wanted to say a few things real quick and started to apologise like mad... He apologised a great number of times."

While Taichi was still deciding on what to do, Aoki seemed to have really put them into action.

"It's all because of me... From now on, Aoki and Taichi will be overly concerned about my feelings... When I thought about this, I felt that I'm good-for-nothing..."

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Furthermore, I might not be able to laugh with you guys like we did before... When I thought about that, I felt sad and cried. Sorry... I'm too weak."

Though her appearance was [Taichi], her body exuded a sense of transience and sadness that felt like Kiriyama. Taichi thought that it was an aura he couldn't create himself.

"So stop saying 'sorry'. I think Kiriyama has no need to apologise... But let me say it once... Sorry."

Although there were many things to say, Taichi thought there wasn't a need to list them out one by one.

Taichi didn't know if Kiriyama [Taichi] really agreed with him. Kiriyama just plainly nodded her assent and replied with a 'Mmm'.

"Eh, so... Kiriyama, you have androphobia, right?"

After he spoke, Taichi [Kiriyama] discovered his words were far heavier than he expected. They were too heavy for one to bear.

"...Mmm. There isn't a problem with normal chatting unless there were some unnecessary intimacies or

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touching... then it would get uncomfortable—something like shivering."

'Hahaha'—Kiriyma [Taichi] lightly laughed. Her laughter seemed like she was trying to convince herself that it was not a big deal, as if she were numb to pain.

"When did it start...? There should be some reason behind it, right? If you don't mind, could you tell me?"

Taichi [Kiriyma] stood upright, staring straight into Kiriyma's [Taichi's] eyes as if trying to convey all of his thoughts to her.

Kiriyma [Taichi] laughed lightly and looked away from Taichi.

"You really stepped into my affairs right away."

"Do you have a problem?"

"No, but I'm worried."

Kiriyma [Taichi] spoke vaguely with a dark expression—an implication that Taichi couldn't understand.

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"Regardless... this is what you, Taichi, would do... I suppose its okay to say it if it's you! On that note, aside from Inaba, you'll be the only person in school who has heard about the incident."

Kiriyama [Taichi] said with a slightly brighter tone, then bowed like a clown.

"Or I should say, though my introduction took so long, it isn't something so appalling. If only taking into account the incident itself, it is nothing special—it is a frequent occurrence that you can find pretty much anywhere."

After mentioning the premises, Kiriyama [Taichi] commenced.

"This happened when I was in middle school—I was almost attacked by a boy—but it wasn't really serious! After all, he 'almost' attacked me. He didn't really do anything to me; and before that, I had already resisted him and escaped."

Kiriyama [Taichi] continued without looking at Taichi.

"If I were to say the thing that shocked me... I'm quite a vigorous karate girl, right? So I was quite confident in my own skills. Starting from primary school, I'd never

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lost to any boys in fights, so I always reckon if I were attacked I'd retaliate. But, when I was really in that situation, things weren't as I expected—I could only escape... Did you know? Men are extremely strong, so strong that for girls, comparing would be close to despair. Then I thought,'Ahah, I can never win against boys.'"

Kiriyama [Taichi] lifted her head and looked at the night sky. Taichi [Kiriyama] followed her and looked up. The first quarter moon hung on the dark sky—it was exactly a half moon.

"Until now, though I've lost a few times to elder opponents in my battles, I've never thought that I wouldn't win against someone even if I spent my whole lifetime training for it. But against normal boys that I could find anywhere, this thought grew in me. This was around the time when boys gradually overtook the girls in puberty and growth. It was because of these things stacking together that whenever I thought that 'girls could never win against boys' I started to become scared. Then I started to think that boys and girls are different creatures and I became more scared. When I realised that boys and girls were so different, I would start to come up

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with any differences in ability between them. Finding these differences made me even more scared... I am such a fool."

"You're not a fool—having those thoughts are not strange."

Of course, Taichi, as a boy, did not plan to say something presumptuous like 'I can sympathise with you'; still, he could imagine what happened.

"...Anyways, it's because of the incident that boys became entirely alien in my heart. There was a time when I would feel sick even when getting close to boys. That time, however, was short, and I can normally chat and play. But, when I'm extremely close or have body contact, I will still... To be more specific, when I notice the fact that he has entered my personal bubble and is therefore offensive, I'll feel a strong feeling of repulsion."

"That is to say... the distance you usually use to communicate with us is the distance you can handle even if you are attacked?"

"At least it's a distance where I can parry attacks."

In theory, Taichi should have frequently come to a distance of normal conversation with her.

"What is reason behind this... Although I don't think that the incident became the trauma itself, it certainly is because of the time when I was held by my wrists and was overpowered, so my subconscious thought that 'I would lose when boys got hold of me'... Undoubtedly, it was my problem, but I don't understand at all. How strange."

This was what happened—Kiriyama [Taichi] bowed at the end to finish off her role as the clown.

Her trauma seemed to burn deeper than expected, and was in a position hard to observe.

In Kiriyama's heart, though she would not intentionally avoid males, her instincts seemed to have taken them as a dangerous existence—in other words, even though she understood it was not the case, her body couldn't act the way she wished. It was not an ideal situation for her to overcome the incident.

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—Overcoming it... Taichi thought of this at once.  
Would Aoki and Inaba criticise him as an optimist for  
having such thoughts?

No matter what happens, the first thing to do is to  
relax my mood.

"Eh, Kiriyma, how would you want to deal with this?  
That is... the thing about androphobia."

Though he should not have asked, Taichi still wanted  
to clarify.

"About this... I don't really want to comment on this."

Kiriyma [Taichi] frowned and smiled  
wryly—showing a vexed look. Taichi had also seen this  
look before—he should have seen [Kiriyma] herself  
having this look.

"Is it all right if you could just say what you hope it  
will become?"

"But..."

This time she made an entirely vexed look. She wanted to speak but she couldn't.

"I need your help."

Taichi [Kiriymama] said firmly.

"—This is the problem."

Kiriymama [Taichi] pointed out the problem concisely and sharply and sighed. That sigh contained more than just surprise or refusal; it was something close to gentleness.

"Saying those things to Taichi is equal to saying 'help me'."

Was it because of her existence in my body—an existence like a doppelgänger, that her words clutched the part of my heart that was least exposed?

—Is that my 'nature'?

"Is this wrong?"

"It's not wrong... but I don't like it. It makes me feel bad when I trouble other people because of my weakness..."

Kiriyama [Taichi] smiled wryly, like she was extremely troubled.

Seeing her, Taichi thought, 'Humans are such annoying creatures.'

Although they both were thinking for each other, they could not understand each other; so gentleness always easily brushed past them. Even if one thinks it was kindness, the other one may think of it as a complete opposite.

Even though their personalities exchanged with their bodies, even though they were so close to each other, it didn't change. The human heart cannot be seen—if we don't say it, no one will know.

So, say it!

Say it and march forward!

"In my opinion, it will be troublesome if Kiriyma still has androphobia."

Taichi also felt what he said was a bit too stern.

But it certainly will become like this if the truth has to be said.

So he said it.

It didn't really matter if Kiriyma had androphobia. We can solve the problem gradually by protecting her at her side and giving her warmth. This way, even though the problem might not be solved, we can still maintain peace on the surface.

But Taichi already said it was 'troublesome' so he couldn't change his plan now. If he couldn't solve it, failure was the only thing waiting for him.

As expected, Kiriyma [Taichi] quivered agitatedly while anger filled her body.

"What you said... isn't that too much? I didn't want it to become like this! I already think that this is repugnant! And you even say this is troublesome—"

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"So, let me help you."

"What—"

"You also said clearly you don't like it."

Let us stop using any safe measures and confront it head-on.

This isn't denying the fact, but accepting it and throwing myself into battle.

"What... does that mean? What happened to you... No more of your meddling, please."

Kiriyama [Taichi] stood still and said with shivering sounds.

In Taichi's opinion, obstacles that haven't been tackled until now cannot be tackled if we don't face them. Even if there are high risks we must walk this path—this was his way of doing things, a way that couldn't be and wouldn't be changed.

And more importantly, Taichi had thought of something.

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If there are 'things that only happen in this condition', there should also be 'things that could only be done in this condition'.

"Kiriyama, you are scared of being suppressed by the strength of boys and being hopeless about what to do; in other words, you are scared of being restrained and beaten if the opponent uses brute force, right?"

"Eh? R-right."

"So, Kiriyama, although your brain knows better, you can't act the way you want... Basically, you have developed some kind of repulsive reaction, but you aren't sure whether its your body or your subconscious that's responsible for it. Is this what you said?"

Taichi [Kiriyama] slowly shortened his distance with Kiriyama [Taichi].

"Right... oh and why are you keep getting closer to me ?"

"In other words, if you let your subconscious understand that it doesn't need to worry about being restrained by boys, you can overcome your androphobia. .. This explanation is correct, right?"

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"...In simple terms, maybe it is... Hey, your eyes look a bit dangerous."

They were so close that they could already hear the sounds of each other's breathing if they paid attention.

Even though Taichi was only slightly taller than average when compared to the rest of the students in their first year of high school, from [Kiriyama's] perspective, his body seemed really large.

"Now, using my body, I'm going to show you that you will never lose to boys. This is called shock therapy; are you prepared for it?"

"Umm... You looked a bit dangerous just then... And it feels even more scary to get approached by [myself]."

As she had said, Kiriyama [Taichi] cowered and stepped back, her face stretched tight.

"So leave it to me, Kiriyama. Now, try holding on to [my body]."

"Okay, good."

Kiriyama [Taichi] held on to Taichi's [Kiriyama's] left shoulder with a shudder.

After hearing someone else's past and being conscious of it, Taichi [Kiriyama] felt uncomfortable when [Taichi], as a boy, touched him... Taichi did have that kind of feeling.

Kiriyama [Taichi] spied Taichi's face with an uneasy look. Taichi [Kiriyama] then showed a smile deliberately.

He sucked in some air, preparing himself.

Although he would torture his [body], it didn't really matter.

So let me show this to Kiriyama!

Taichi [Kiriyama] aimed at Kiriyama's [Taichi's] 'important body part' and used his knee to strike heavily at it.

The soft 'part' on the knee transformed and twisted.

"Ouch!"

Taichi [Kiriyama] screamed for no reason.

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Although it was not a full powered strike (when he thought of the pain, he could not use his full power), the accuracy of the attack was so brilliant that the attacker also felt a bit scared.

"You...!"

Kiriyama [Taichi] screamed deep down from her throat, but no sound was heard. She seemed to have lost her consciousness and bent her body, not keeping a defensive posture anymore but was emptily looking at him.

...Is she dead? Taichi thought about it seriously.

No, no problem; she is still moving.

Kiriyama [Taichi] was moaning sounds Taichi had rarely heard (or even never heard) in his life before, like 'Uwa~' or 'Gwa~' or 'Wuha'. She kneeled down on the floor, scraping it with her left hand; maybe it was because of nausea that she used her other hand to cover her mouth.

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Taichi's [Kiriymama's] face also twitched. After all, it was bad to look at [his body] suffering from such immense pain. Of course, compared to the hell-like pain Kiriymama was suffering, that was nothing.

Kiriymama's [Taichi] actions slowly calmed down. She was now cowered on the floor and breathing heavily in and out.

Taichi [Kiriymama] saw this chance and squatted down beside Kiriymama.

"Look, Kiriymama. You can knock the opponent out in one hit with this, right?"

Kiriymama [Taichi] forcefully lifted her head, staring at Taichi [Kiriymama] harshly. Beads of sweat were on her forehead and her eyes were filled with tears.

"You... you... no matter the circumstance... you should be clear... of what you can do... and what you cannot."

"But through this—"

Just when Taichi was about to say the gist—

At first, he thought it was a joke.

Taichi lifted his head and saw [Kiriyama] in front of him. Until now, he should have been [Kiriyama], who was looking down on at [Taichi's body].

This means that

—We returned to normal? At the same moment as when Taichi understood this, there was a sharp pain coming from between his legs.

"Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch!"

It's transformed, definitely! Taichi thought.

He quickly pressed on to his abdomen with his hands and shook his body back and forth to slightly relieve the pain.

Nevertheless, his resistance was unavailing—it was even like using fog to exterminate fire. Taichi's eyes rushed with tears anew.



"Hm? Eh? Ah, I'm back to myself! Haha, you're condemned!"

"Now it's insignificant."

Taichi couldn't speak normally for now.

"What's the 'significance'? Significance! Phew~ that could be my most painful experience in my life... I thought I would die with the pain... weird...? Eh, Taichi, someone is coming this way."

Even though he heard Kiriyma's scared voice, Taichi wasn't in any mood to care about it. The only thing he was thinking of was how to endure through this intense pain—

"Eh, listen to me! That person is walking here directly. Quick, run away...! Even though we're not doing anything bad, if someone spots us in this dismal condition, it will be troublesome. So, let's get outta here..."!

After all, moans and screams sounded out from here just then, so Kiriyma has a point, but—

"Then... please leave me alone... get away... I don't think I can take it anymore..."

"Why are you acting like you're in a cliché action movie? Ah! Stand up, quick!"

Taichi did not mean to act this way.

"No, I think I might not be able to stand it... Besides, I don't think I can stand up by myself..."

"What are you guys doing!"

A sound came from afar. The reproachful sound seemed to belong to a female.

"Rats! Oh man, please stand up now!"

Kiriyama potently pulled the sleeves of Taichi's hooded jacket, trying to lift him up; and so he was lifted—although still with a bent back.

"Ouch Ouch Ouch, please, let me rest..."

"Be quiet! Pull yourself together and run!"

Kiriyama stayed with her pose and began to run, dragging Taichi with her.

"Wuaahhhh...!"

It was an appalling display of power—a post-karate girl genius indeed.

"Heeahhhhh!"

Kiriyama shouted to increase her enthusiasm and also the turning speed of her legs and the pulling force of her arms, which were still pulling Taichi... In the end, they used twenty minutes to escape.

When they got back on their feet, they had already run to the town's largest river.

"Kiri, Kiriyama...! It's... all right now..."

Taichi said, panting hard. He had already passed his limits.

Kiriyama grabbed him and ran a fairly long distance. The female who thought they were suspicious didn't seem to have chased them (though from the start she didn't plan to chase them).

"Eh? Ah, right."

Kiriyama finally stopped running and breathed hard. Her small breasts shook with her deep breaths, which were fast but rhythmic—She even seemed poised.

Taichi sucked in some air, pacified his heart, and sent it to his head. He had something he must say now.

"Kiriyama... Look at your left hand."

He told Kiriyama.

"Eh?"

Kiriyama moved her vision slowly to her left hand.

Her left hand was gripping tightly onto Taichi's right hand.

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During their run, Kiriayama seemed to have subconsciously moved her hand from his sleeves to his hand. It was certainly not convenient to pull someone by their sleeves and run.

"Eh... Could it be?"

Kiriayama immediately loosened her grip, embraced her chest and stepped two to three steps backward.

"Kiriayama... Look... Isn't this all right?"

Taichi said with a smile.

"It's because... I was running for my life, so I would... Besides, since it was Tai-Taichi..."

Kiriayama diverted her vision aside and rubbed her left hand with her right hand with a flushed face.

"But now we can confirm that... at least... Kiriayama's androphobia... isn't an obstacle that can't be overcome."

Although from the very beginning, he already knew that being prepared solemnly and stirringly could solve any problems.

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Because... didn't Kiriyama and Gotou, who was possessed by «Fuusenkazura», have a fight before?

Although those conditions were because of emergencies that broke her inner limits, it had already proved that this wasn't impossible.

Taichi's breath finally calmed down.

"Besides... the low blow was very effective, right?"

Kiriyama's face and ears became red all in a sudden.

"Right! That was what happened! What is with you? You should have better ideas! Also, if you were going to do something, please tell me beforehand, okay?"

"Didn't I tell you? This is a shock therapy—didn't it work very well?"

"Why does a girl like me have to experience the pain of a guy's trauma? Uwagh~ Thanks to you, even when I came back to [my own body], that feeling was still creeping over me... I hate you~~! How can I say such erotic things like this...! I...I want to die instead!"

She looked like she played happily.

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"Fine, calm down. Kiriyama."

"I-It's all because of Taichi that things ended up like this!"

Kiryama spoke, her voice cracking, with all her might. Her wet eyes and flushed face were cute—so cute, in fact, that people wouldn't be able to resist fondling her head. Taichi wanted to say that, but he felt that Kiriyama would scream because of this. He decided to keep it to himself.

"Haha, haha"—Kiryama agitatedly breathed. After a while, she recommenced.

"But that move deals so much pain... that attack... would every boy become like that?"

"Yeah, I'm not an exception. Please don't worry."

"...Oh, I understand. Mmm... If a boy were to be hit with that, he could do nothing about it... Although I knew this in theory, I didn't expect it to hurt so much... Mmm... Only one strike and I can win for sure..."

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Kiriyama started to confirm her knee kicking and punching poses (with no specific reason).

"...It works in whatever pose you're in, as long as you are not held at the back or being pressed on the floor... Hmm... Simply being restrained at the wrists wouldn't be a problem..."

Of course, the move she will use will always be set to aim for 'the weakest point in men'.

"Did I... make a scary weapon that would strike fear into the hearts of men across the world...?"

Kiriyama let go of her hands and got out of her battle stance. Seemingly, she was satisfied—

"I will practice at home later on."

—No way, she seemed to want to be even stronger... this is getting scary.

"But, this move will deal a lot of pain, so it is very dangerous... Eh... Taichi, why would want to go so far to help me...? And also to the point where you damage [your own body]..."

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Kiriyama played with her long, chestnut coloured hair as the autumn wind blew it. She was waiting for her answer with a melancholic expression. It seemed that her expression had much more meaning, most of which Taichi was oblivious to.

But even when he was inquired so seriously and tried to think of the answer anew, what came to Taichi's mind were simply words.

"Because I want to; is that answer all right?"

Taichi tried to answer with a serious look on his face. Kiriyama couldn't help but to laugh at him.

"...It's Taichi, indeed."

Kiriyama approached Taichi step by step after speaking.

She then raised her left fist to her face and puffed at it.

The fist sounded lightly and struck somewhere near Taichi's heart.

—Her fist was trembling.

But Kiriymama smiled gleefully at Taichi. Her smile was so bright it could save people who looked at it. Then she said.

"Thanks, Taichi."

March forward, Kiriymama.

Taichi supported her spiritually.

## Chapter 7 : Finale and Another Starting Point

Next morning, Yaegashi Taichi discovered the witness of his and Kiriyma's chaos yesterday in a completely unexpected place.

That was because the president of Class 1C Fujishima Maiko directly asked Taichi, "Were you with a girl in a park yesterday night?" It was alleged that the park was part of the walking route of Fujishima's dog (a bulldog).

"W-What are you saying, Fujishima? I didn't go there yesterday."

Of course, Taichi decided to beat around the bush. Taichi felt he was in some ill-fated relationship with Fujishima lately.

"...Really? Wasn't Yaegashi-kun and a petite long-haired girl bunching up at the park yesterday?"

"We didn't bunch up."

"**We** didn't bunch up...?"

Fujishima's eyes behind her spectacles brightened up sharply.

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"N-No. That was a mere grammatical problem."

"...Oh~? Perhaps I didn't see very clearly because of the dim sky. I might have mistook you; if that's the case, I'm sorry for my accusation."

Although he didn't want to set Fujishima up, Taichi felt remorseful for lying to her and letting her apologise for it.

"...I thought I caught you cheating..."

Fujishima turned her head to a side and said lowly.

There were much in her words to be angry at, so this relieved Taichi's remorse.

"Forget it. Right, I want to ask you...Yaegashi-kun, have you been acting a bit weird lately?"

"Oh! Is it so...? I was like this before."

"Oh... Also, Inaba-san and Nagase-san seemed a bit weird too! And you guys belong to the same club, so as the class president, I want to know what happened."

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"...Nothing happened. Mmm... After all, our first year is already half over, our relationships have become better so we showed different facets of ourselves... Is this what happened?"

"Really? Then it's good... Well, I will be sure to find actual evidence for your mistakes; after that, you're doomed."

After emphasising her statement by pointing to Taichi, Fujishima left. Maybe I should seriously consider correcting her misunderstandings.

At that moment, Nagase Iori came by and seized the seat in front of Taichi.

She fixed her eyes on Taichi for no apparent reason.

"...Was that not Taichi? A petite long-haired girl... Is that Yui?"

"Y-You heard all of that? Ayahh, there are petite long-haired girls everywhere..."

Being seen his getting away, Taichi could only defend himself to dispatch her.

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"If that's true, then leave it. Whether or not it was Taichi has nothing to do with me... That girl... was she just saying random stuff?"

Pouting her lips, Nagase didn't seem to be in a good mood.

If there weren't anything special, all the Cultural Research Club members gathered in the clubroom right after school. The only way to prevent most troubles is by putting the five personality-exchanging people in one room.

What they each do in the room is different: Inaba Himeko worked on the computer as usual, Nagase was reading manga, Kiriyama had been making beads lately, Taichi was doing revision and preparing for his lessons, and Aoki was left doing nothing but interfering others; I wish someone would play with him.

That day, Taichi worked on his schoolwork diligently to try to habitualise it; Aoki also paid heed to his schoolwork (maybe it was because he needed to hand in a report the day after). Inaba peeked at the two, and continued typing on the keyboard.

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After a while Nagase and Kiriyma entered the clubroom.

"Hi~!"

Nagase threw her bag on the sofa and headed towards it.

She shouted "Hi, Taichi!" on her way and slapped Taichi on his back.

"...Why are you using that 'this is the first time we met today!' kind of way to greet me? We've just seen each other fifteen minutes ago."

"But by this atmosphere, I feel like meeting for the first time today."

"I didn't say anything. Shouldn't this be a problem of your feelings?"

This girl is so carefree... This may even be enviable in Taichi's eyes.

"Hi... Taichi!"

This time the same part of his back was slapped even harder.

"Ouch!"

Taichi couldn't help to scream and turn his head, only to see Kiriyama, standing in front of him, embarrassedly smiling.

"...Yo, Kiriyama," Taichi replied with a smile.

They looked at their faces for a while. At the same time , Kiriyama kept slapping Taichi's back.

"...It's okay to stop now."

That being said, Kiriyama stopped her combo. Taichi was sure his back had turned red.

"Let me tell you, Taichi. I may become interested in martial arts and professional wrestling; let's talk more on this when I'm free."

Kiryama said with a weak voice, as if clenching her teeth while she spoke.

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"Hand it to me! If you need it, we can start now—"

"Not n-now...Wait for next time!"

Kiriyama swung her head potently and stopped Taichi who was excitedly coming forward.

There was no need to be so kind, Taichi thought.

Looking at Kiriyama, Taichi suddenly felt that her loving of cute things had something to do with her androphobia... maybe wanting to escape to a world man cannot enter.

At this moment, Taichi realised that the other three persons—Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki—were all looking at him with awe.

"...What happened between Taichi and Yui?"

Aoki asked with an expression becoming stern.

"Eh, about that..."

Taichi spied at Kiriyama and pondered what to start with.

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"Nothing! Nothing at all!"

Flushed and denying in a flurry, Kiriyma briskly sat down on the seat diagonally across that of Taichi and started to search for things in her bag.

The three stared straight at her for a while.

After that, Aoki turned his head and examined Taichi's and Kiriyma's face.

Nagase covered half of her face with a manga while lightly staring at Taichi.

The atmosphere was quite embarrassing.

Taichi, however, couldn't tell them what Kiriyma doesn't want them to know, so he coughed two times and faced the table anew.

Kiriyma also seemed to feel the embarrassing atmosphere, so she said, "I-I'm going to the washroom!" and escaped from the clubroom.

Seeing her leave, Nagase commenced,

"...I saw Yui go to the washroom just a while ago already."

"What is going on, Taichi! Did something really happen yesterday? I feel that Yui is different from yesterday in our phone call," Aoki asked promptly.

"I-I didn't do anything great! We just... had a chat about her troubles. Aoki, you have also talked to Yui. That was pretty much what happened."

**"Just had a chat—**How can that make your relationship so close?! I had no idea... Crap, Is Taichi my biggest rival? And it's threatening that you aren't aware of this...!"

Aoki moaned of his distress.

"If that is the case... Iori! Let's start a battle meeting!"

"I-I should have no relation with this whatsoever. Or I might as well say this has nothing to do with me!"

Nagase moaned with Aoki. This time Inaba, at the front, threw herself in.

"Honestly, what happened between you two?"

Although reluctant, Taichi could feel 'I won't let you get away that easily' from Inaba's eyes.

"Ayahh...I didn't really do much! It was only giving Kiriyama a little push and she marched onwards by herself."

Yes, this was the only thing that happened.

Inaba blinked a few times in surprise and smiled lightly.

"So...maybe this personality exchange can be helpful! But maybe it was Taichi that such a miracle could be made."

She looked as though she had a myriad of thoughts.

Smiling at Taichi calmly again, Inaba leant on the back of the chair, gazed at the sky, and covered her eyes with her right hand, muttering,

"To me, ...all I could see were potential problems."

Inaba looked abnormally weak.

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Later Taichi immediately knew his instincts were right.

It was because on that day—Inaba collapsed.

"So, let me do some things while you sleep here obediently. If Mr. Gotou comes here before I come back, help me to greet him."

That being said, Yamada Touka (30 years old, divorced once), the nursing teacher, left the Health Room.

"Inaban... I thought you were dead..."

"Idiot, I was only dizzy. I won't die yet."

While still lying on the bed, Inaba lightly replied to Nagase, who was still worried and looked like she was about to cry. From her fall in the clubroom to being carried to the Health Room, Nagase seemed to waver extremely.

"Yah, scared the hell out of me... You really collapsed in a **bong**!"

Kiriyama also showed an extremely worn out expression.

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"My body has been a bit bad lately...But it isn't a big deal. In fact, there was no need to come to the Health Room."

"No, Inaba! You have to care for your own body!"

Being denounced by Aoki (and maybe this was the first time), Inaba, with an annoyed look, only said, "Yes. Yes." to dispatch him.

After some time, the class teacher of Class 1C and also the advisor of the Cultural Research Club...In other words, the manager of all things that are related to Inaba in the school, Gotou Ryusen, came to the Health Room.

"Hey~ Inaba~ Are you all right? Oh, everyone is here."

A student collapsed—how could he speak so easily.

"I've given you much trouble, Gotou. You can now return."

"...You should give more respect to teachers...Leave it."

He didn't really care.

"Eh~ Where is Ms. Yamada?"

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"She is busy...Eh, according to her, "the reason why Inaba collapsed is because she accumulated too much stress, so she would be fine with enough rest."

"Understood, Yaegashi. So, what's the case now, Inaba?"

"No problem," Inaba declared without hesitation.

"Then...If that's what Ms. Yamada said, then there's no problem. Eh~ It's rare that you five are all here, do you have anything to say...Mmm?"

"Ah!" Kiriyama yelled as if something came to her mind.

"...I didn't make this week's «Bunken News»...!"

" " " "Ah!" " " "

The four members of the Cultural Research Club left screamed together.

Seemingly, they gathered together every day in the name of the CRC, but they could completely forget the work of the club...the sole work that let others to confirm the existence and significance of the club.

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Then Gotou also screamed.

"Ah, well, actually, I didn't get your draft before the usual deadline."

"Sorry, Gotou. It's because we're busy in a large-scale interview recently. It looks like our draft this week won't get before the deadline. Next month we will add more juice to it, okay?"

Inaba immediately got away with it. How could she lie so easily?

"A large-scale interview, uh? But «Bunken News» are made monthly to gain the club's recognition...Forget it."

He didn't really care.

Only at these times did Taichi want to thank Gotou for his sloppiness.

After that, although she rejected our kindness, we still decided to take her home in case anything happens. Because Inaba proposed "four persons to take me home is

too annoying! At least make it two!" So only Taichi and Nagase who won the scissor-paper-rock game took her home.

The three of them chatted randomly while changing to trams, going to the nearest station from Inaba's house, and the 10-minute walk to Inaba's house. Though she didn't look well, Inaba still acted like nothing had happened.

"So, it's about time you make yourself clear. Taichi, what happened between you and Kiriyama yesterday?"

Inaba suddenly said on their way.

"What is **what!** There was no relation."

"The relation doesn't matter. In short, if you don't tell me, I'll be very annoyed and might even collapse in agony~"

Inaba weakly leaned onto Taichi and passing her arm into his shoulder, exactly like a troublesome drunkard.

"Hm, using your body as a bargain...that is too cunning..."

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"Besides~Iori, you also care, right?"

"Yeah, as good friends of they two, I have an obligation to know."

Seeing Nagase speaking with an intended tone, Inaba whispered "Yah?" and felt puzzled. It looked like Nagase's reaction was different from that of her expectation.

"...Ah, it's not that strange...forget it. Look, Iori also said it."

"But Kiriyama doesn't want to say it..."

"Ah~ you are getting annoying! If it was something not nice to ask, we wouldn't. However I look at it, I think it could be heard. So, tell us!"

"Y-Yeah. If you don't tell, I may also get hurt badly and feel bad of the bonds of us five...and then lay sick on a bed~"

"E-Even Iori wants to hear it so badly. Hey!"

"As...she say so, I also..."

It was Nagase who was accompanying Inaba; but Inaba weakened her voice and didn't continue to talk. She showed an expression of depression...Was her body unwell again? But it looks like it was not the case.

Taichi wanted to ask Inaba about this, but before he could, Inaba quickly changed back to her usual look.

"In conclusion, if you don't tell us, I will shout 'Ayahh ~ He is a pervert~!'"

...It appears that I can't withstand their pressure anymore.

Taichi didn't mention the details. He only concisely told them what he did that let Kiriyma overcome her trauma.

"Bahahahaha, how did you think of that?! 'A fool that loves to sacrifice himself'...that is some surprising shock therapy! Nyaaa~ I'm impressed."

Inaba's reaction was as expected.

But Nagase's reaction was different from Inaba, which made Taichi puzzled.

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"...Although I knew Yui was not that good at dealing with boys... I wouldn't have imagined that this was so serious a phobia that she couldn't even touch boys... How could I possibly not figure this out..."

Nagase drooped her head and swung it. Her silky hair became a total mess.

"I can't even... become someone's friend... even after trying so hard..."

Did she really have to say it to this point?

What caused her to dig so deep?

Although Taichi didn't know the reason, he said,

"Nagase, listen to me."

Taichi spied at Nagase's expression only to see her vibrantly lifting up her head. After confirming her watery eyes, eyes that were as beautiful as jewels and reflecting his own image, he spoke to her.

"I think that the last thing Kiriyama wants...is to see someone agonized, worried or embarrassed for her."

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It was because I saw the crying face of Kiriyama when Aoki apologised to her, Taichi thought.

"So Nagase, please don't worry too much. Treat Kiriyama the same as before. If you do, Kiriyama will be more than glad."

This method should also be used onto Taichi.

"Same as before... is referring to...?"

That was a shivering voice as if asking for help.

"Same as before... same as before... No, there's no need to think it so hard. Nagase, it'll be fine if you treat her with no preconceptions. Only that... will make Kiriyama happy!"

"Is it really fine...to Kiriyama?"

"Yeah, it's enough."

It was not to comfort her. Taichi believed it deeply.

"Kukuku, you two surely are fit."

Inaba interrupted.

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"You both need each other, this can't be wrong."

"I-Inaban! Can you stop your incessant nonsense?"

"Hmm? Incessant...?"

Taichi was doubtful of this.

"So I was saying! Inaban also said Taichi and I are....a... 'perfect combination'."

Inaba told Taichi something about how he and Iori fit; maybe she also told Iori the same thing, so Iori's attitude became a bit strange?

"Actually you are a 'perfect combination'; this can't be helped...Ah~ But Yui must have already been mesmerised by Taichi."

"Baha!"

Taichi puffed .

"I-Inaban...You said it too directly..."

"This is the fact. There is nothing I could do about it. The trickiest thing about fools who love to sacrifice

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themselves is that their personalities always mesmerise people, right? After all, being willing to do anything to help someone will easily cause misunderstandings. In summary, Taichi, please don't hurt Iori or Yui. If you do, I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget... And don't forget that sometimes kindness will hurt others as well."

"I understand."

Taichi bowed to Inaba.

"But if you three become a love triangle ...Ahah, will adding Aoki make a love rectangle?... If your relationships don't get entangled, it's fine with me."

She was now in a mode where she would speak whatever she wanted.

While they were chatting idly, they had already arrived at Inaba's house. Although Inaba said they didn't have to follow her to the end, Taichi and Nagase still insisted to walk with her all the way to the door of her house.

"Sorry for giving you all the trouble, Taichi and Iori."

"Please don't. Have a good and quiet rest."

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"Speaking of which, Inaba, you're thinking for us all the time; but now you should really clear your mind and rest."

"I'm fine... I'm fine."

Inaba took her eyes off them and smiled wryly. Her smile also carried a hint of masochism .

She walked through a luxurious western garden and headed to the gate... but on her way she turned her head back and said explicitly,

"Oh~ right. I almost forgot to say...Iori, let Taichi solve your trauma."

Although her words were thrown out without any foreshadowing, if we look at Iori's stunned expression, we can fully understand that this was an extremely important issue.

"Inaban... Didn't we agree that we won't mention it to anyone else...?"

Iori, with an icy look as beautiful as an ice sculpture, spoke in a cold voice that could freeze our backs.

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Seeing Nagase's expression, Taichi was hit off base.

"Taichi, if you can help her, please do."

Inaba's straight shadow vanished into the house. Even at the last moment, she was still caring for the affairs of others.

So they would have to go to the station and say goodbye after they had sent Inaba home... But there was a strange atmosphere between Taichi and Nagase.

It was all because of Inaba's last words.

Should I ask her or not? Should I face it or not? Should I resist it or not?

Honestly, Taichi could only see one answer.

"Hey, Nagase, what is your trauma?"

Although being inquired, Nagase gave no response and started to walk quicker.

Taichi didn't continue and fell silent.

Did she plan to not say anything about this? If she did, then I should stop asking—when Taichi made up his mind, Nagase commenced,

"Inaba is too impulsive! Though I know she did it for us and that her words are mostly right..."

Nagase didn't meet her eyes with Taichi and kept looking straight ahead.

"Does Taichi want to know about my case? If you promise me you'll treat me like before no matter what, I'll tell you."

As if being scared of looking at Taichi's expression, Nagase turned away from him completely. Her face was as fragile as glass that would break at the slightest touch.

What happened to Nagase that the others didn't know ?

Taichi couldn't estimate how abysmal and dark her real side was, but he felt that if he went too deep he would be in danger; once you have spied in the dark, you couldn't act as if nothing had happened.

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Nevertheless, however high the risk was—

"I understand. I promise you. I want to give it my all if it is something I can handle."

If I do not accept it, I could not do anything about it.

—I would be unable to think for others on their side.

—lest would I be able to save them.

"Taichi would say something like that, wouldn't he."

That being said, Nagase finally loosened up and showed a compassionate but wry smile—a smile that was familiar, a smile that Kiriyma had also shown, a smile that conveyed a sense of mystery.

"Do you want to sit down for a while?"

Nagase suggested. Taichi agreed and they sat on the low concrete wall near the parking lot.

Nagase straightened her legs. "Yahhh~," she sighed deeply.

"I don't want to say this, and I know I shouldn't... but Inaban mentioned it. If I don't tell you, you would feel anxious and annoyed, right?"

"Furthermore, Inaba even said 'if you can help, please do'; if I tell you I'm not anxious I'm just lying."

"So I was saying~~" Nagase said while kicking the pebbles around her feet. The pebbles bounced forward but deviated to the right and fell down into the drain.

"So, let me tell you."

Nagase fixed her black pearl-like eyes on Taichi. This was the first time Taichi realised that when a beautiful and flawless face shows no emotion, humans would become awe-stricken. Nagase stares deep in Taichi's eyes, as if confirming some kind of existence, then began to speak.

"...But before that, let me tell you a joke!"

".....Eh?"

What is this girl saying? Taichi thought.

"Nyaaa~ we were alone before... To be accurate, when I became [Aoki]... When the atmosphere became tense, I also told a joke to soothe it. So I was thinking whether we should first begin with a joke."

"There is no need, okay?! I wasn't hoping for it! What is with your need to break the tense atmosphere between us when we are alone?"

What she said was not only a problem of being serious or not.

"But, at this moment...I just can't think of any jokes!"

"Then you should give up on the jokes, hey!"

"I was just joking~ I want to say *a joke that was my attempt to say a joke but failing*...How's this?"

"What do you mean by 'how's this'!?! Even if you want to say *a joke that was your attempt to say a joke but failing*, I didn't want to listen to a joke at the very start!"

"Maybe Taichi didn't want to listen to jokes, but I hope you understand that *a joke that was my attempt to say a joke but failing* wasn't because I can't think of a joke, but because I deliberately chose this joke that has no jokes!"

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"I am~ very clear that your saying *a joke of your attempt to say a joke but failing* wasn't because you can't think of a joke, but because you deliberately chose to joke with no jokes!"

"I may as well say that *the joke that was an attempt to joke but failing* is not merely *a joke that was an attempt to joke but failing*, but that keeps saying 'joke', 'joke' to deliberately correlate it with the joke said before; thus, making it a joke that is a difficult joke to make...Nyaa? My suffix sounded weird..."

"I have already vaguely guessed it from the start!"

"By the way, Taichi is unexpectedly going along with the weird atmosphere I'm trying to make."

"If I'm with Nagase, I would, for no reason, act like this ..."

Why did we sit together outside an open parking lot discussing such things?

"Now, let's go back to our main topic—"

Then, the jovial smile on Nagase disappeared and what was left was only a poker face.

"I... actually have five fathers... Ah, but there were only three that legally registered. Yeah, so this is what happened."

Before Taichi was prepared, Nagase already let Taichi pry into her dark side.

Of course, Taichi felt puzzled.

"Eh...So this means that your mother divorced and... remarried?"

"Yeah, something like that, but it wasn't really anything. Although I met people of different nature, there were none that were completely unbearable. No matter what the man was—a man who tried to get on well with me, a man that hated me, or a man that brought children himself... However the person, I got along with him fairly well."

Taichi certainly did not have any related experience, so he couldn't distinctly tell whether her case was scary or not. Four fathers that originally were complete strangers

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and siblings that were originally complete strangers... Nagase could treat all of them as family members without any problem.

"But it is certain that I would get along with them! It's because I've kept changing **myself** to get along with them."

"Kept changing... **yourself**...?"

Nagase continued while staring at the concrete floor of the parking lot.

"My second father—or my first 'stepfather', was a bit problematic. That was when I was in primary one or two. .. Put in simple terms, He uses violence. Ah, but it wasn't him that caused my trauma! I may as well say the trauma didn't even exist in my own opinion."

"So what Inaban said about 'Please help her to solve this' may be somewhat different from this", Nagase complemented.

"Though I called it as violence, it was not violence that would take me to the children welfare centre. I may as well say I didn't let him do it... no, rather, should I say 'I let him not do it'?"

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Taichi could only listen attentively.

"I played the role of **myself**, the role accompanies the other's likeliness."

Whether it was her eyes, nose, mouth or ears, they all stayed in a condition that was naturally born and grown. She, who didn't need any change, let out a smile that carried no fog or haze, and because of its perfect clearness, she seemed even more mystical and dreamy.

"...I tried to be cool, but I, at that time, hadn't thought of anything like 'playing a role'; I just understood what I should do and what I should become so I won't get scolded...And so I did it. I don't know, however, whether it was fortune or misfortune that I happened to excel in this skill and even to an extent that I understood 'If I do this and become like this, not only will I escape from being scolded, I would also become praised'.... And so I did it. I even followed their likes and dislikes... I coped with everything that could change me."

Changing how you act in order to please others was something everyone should have done, more or less, so was what Nagase did an extravagant and abnormal example of this?

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"Right after I started doing that, they divorced again. I went with my mother, and she immediately let a new father become our 'family member'. The new father wasn't bad. In fact, he was good, so I didn't have to do this... But why? Maybe even though I was a child I had an obligation to play a good role. I, again, played the role of **myself** as he wished."

Nagase smiled as if laughing at herself while she swung her head.

" After that, I couldn't stop myself from playing different 'me's to suit different people. One after another, one after another... My days flew gradually, and in my third middle year—that was last spring—my fifth father.. . died of sickness. He was a man of few words, but he was a remarkably excellent person; he actually found out that I was just playing a role. Before he died, he told me to 'live more freely'."

Her voice was as clear and transparent as a clean stream, and vibrated as if the speaker was sobbing. Maybe her past father and their time together recurred to her.

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"My mother also seemed to love him. I'm not sure in which level did the change occurred, but when he died, my mum said to me, sobbing, 'Sorry, my impulsiveness before troubled you. From now on, mum will try to give you a life you wished.' After that, although we were a single-parent family, we lived no different from normal people... At the end, my story was filled with drastic changes; though, the ending was still happy! Look, there's no trauma, right?"

Nagase looked at Taichi's eyes with a slant.

The autumn sunlight gradually dived into the west side, dying her soft flying hair in the wind into a golden colour.

"But, after that—the ugliest and the worst days began."

Nagase's face lost all emotion, as if she were an exquisite statue.

"To act freely and to do whatever I want... Being told that, I tried to change, but I... felt extremely surprised. Because what came to my mind were foolish questions like 'What do I like?' or 'What do I want to do?' or 'Which me is the real me?'. Because I played the expected **me** for

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almost ten years to live, I seemed to have forgotten...the real **me.**"

Those ten years should be the integral period of forming a personality. In those years, however, a girl continually changed herself to cope with others. In the end, this girl became the present Nagase.

"Then... I became troubled. Even though I want to be free and be myself as I wish, I didn't know what to do. I was totally... helpless. So I decided to play a role that adequately coped with the current atmosphere, and continued till now."

So that was why she became like this? Taichi suddenly thought.

So that was why Nagase would let the teacher to decide the club for her to join?

Because she did not have an **I** that she could choose from.

And the Nagase who got along with the club members is in fact a role that was played by Nagase, who thinks that Nagase is not the true her?

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Was it because of the multiple hers that she could choose to play that made her show such diverse expressions?

"The only way I could confidently believe 'this is my original personality' was through my ability of 'seeing through the wishes of others', which was what made me become like this. Though ironic, it was the last wall that could prevent the real **me** from being completely lost... In theory it was... but now, maybe, I was too confused with 'I can do everything freely' that sort of thing... that recently... even my ability—my last wall... started to rust. .. such a feeling occurred to me."

Because of the fact that she didn't notice that Kiriymama had androphobia, Nagase looked scared.

"What should I do... I thought. If I lose my ability, I will really lose what made **me**... And how should I, from now on... get along with everyone...? Where should I play which role... is right...? Lately, the role I tried to play ... seemed... to be out of my control..."

Inaba reckoned Nagase was the most unstable and in the most danger.

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"Then this me... experienced the exchange of the personality and the [body]...Although I almost lose the existence of the I who has a personality, still, I can still live as Iori Nagase. Because, everybody would call me Iori Nagase when they look at my [body]...! No matter what changed inside...only when I have this [body]... But, if because of this personality exchange that even my body would become vague... I will lose the I who has a personality... I will lose the I who has a [body]... If it stays in this condition... gradually no one could be sure **I am who I am**... even I couldn't... Will I... disappear from the world like that?"

After a while of rampantly getting away with the past, what she noticed at the end was her world has already lost its original shape.

To her fragile world that has already begun collapsing, the huge quake caused by the 'personality exchange' was too strong.

From originally clinching on the pier to being thrown off, Nagase was now sinking deep into darkness; sinking deep into abysmal darkness. Taichi wanted to help her. Even if he would need to jump into her darkness he still

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wanted to. But he could not. Not because he was scared, but because even if he really did something, it could not aid her—what he could do was unavailing.

I must think quickly,

What I could do for Nagase now—

"You'll never disappear in the world," Taichi firmly asseverated.

"Why," Nagase inquired Taichi with her pure and flawless eyes.

"Because whatever happens, whatever you become, I'll know Nagase is Nagase."

To Nagase who has drowned, Taichi couldn't even throw down a rope to save her. The only thing he could do was to 'let her see brightness'.

Nagase momentarily blinked her eyes in surprise, and then murmured softly,

"That... is impossible..."

"It's not impossible."

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Taichi looked at Nagase's eyes while he spoke.

"Why can... Taichi... be so sure...?"

Nagase seemed afraid and scared; at the same time, she inquired Taichi as if expecting something.

"This is because...Nagase to me—"

At this moment, Inaba's voice flashed through my mind.

—A fool that loves to sacrifice himself.

This phrase heavily pushed down on Taichi.

What was I planning to say just now?

Also, what did I say it for?

Was it only to help Nagase and let her see the hope of brightness? Or was it something more?

Taichi didn't know.

But he was sure that one who doesn't know it has no right to say 'those words'.

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So Taichi talked evasively, and said anew.

"Eh...So, so I could do it. Please believe in me, it doesn't really matter."

What he said was absurd and ridiculous. One who has perplexity in one's heart could never save Nagase.

Her crystal clear, pure skin along with her gem-like eyes were so bright that they made Taichi avert his eyes.

"If that's what Taichi says, I'll try to believe it..."

Nagase seemed a bit glad, yet lonely.

## Chapter 8 : She Was Born with That

"Morning, Taichi."

After the weekend, meeting Nagase again will inevitably be a bit embarrassing.

"...Morning, Nagase."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Nagase, as if trying to elevate her spirits, used both of her hands to clinch on her white, elastic, and supple cheeks and slapped at it—'pat', 'pat'.

"'Keeping the same attitude no matter what you hear'. Wasn't this a man-to-man agreement we had?!"

"What is wrong with your tone?"

Taichi retorted.

"'Keeping the same attitude no matter what you hear'. Wasn't this a man-to-man agreement we had?!"

"Why do you have to say it twice? Also, you're not a man... Did you plan to make me retort about this?"

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Although Taichi didn't know whether it was the right answer, Nagase laughed with a 'hahaha'.

"Still, why does the meeting become filled with extreme passion when I add a premise that it should be between men? If it were between women or between a man and a woman, there's no way that there could have been that amount of passion!"

"How would I know...By the way, are you okay?"

Though what he said was incoherent, Taichi suddenly wanted to ask.

"...Oh, I'm fine!"

Nagase squinted her eyes and used her fingers to make a winning gesture 'V'.

Could I take that smile as what it was on the surface?

"So, in short, if you have anything that needs my help, tell me."

"Yeah, thank you. You're so gentle."

Nagase drooped her head and murmured embarrassedly.

But then Nagase seemed to have found out something and suddenly turned serious.

"But... the real person who needs to be asked 'Are you okay?' is not me."

Taichi followed Nagase's melancholic eyes to see Himeko Inaba, who was just entering the classroom with a tired look, standing there.



Even though it was the start of a new week, Inaba's body condition had not improved, but had worsened instead.

Taichi was worrying about Nagase; but at the same, he was worrying about Inaba. After all, Inaba's look deterred day by day. Caring about her was understandable.

Putting these words aside, Taichi had not done anything. Days past like usual. On Friday, during the world history lesson , **that** occurred.

Though it was 'usual', when his view momentarily changed to dull black, Taichi suddenly wanted extremely to throw up.

"Wuahhh!"

He briskly used one of his hands to cover his mouth and blocked those things from his stomach from pouring out.

He didn't have time to confirm 'who' he had become, so he immediately stood up and rushed out of the classroom.

He went to the washroom in a scurry.

He could see a black sock and a dress at his thighs, so he decided to go into the girl's washroom.

Taichi rushed into the nearest toilet and spat out all the accumulated vomit; and at the same time, he spat out all the other things that continued to rush out as well. Because of the gastric juice, his throat hurt as if being burnt, and a discomforting feeling, so strong that one would tear apart his chest, came to him. Even his head was in enormous pain.

He noticed someone rushing into the washroom behind him.

"Inaban! Are you okay?"

Upon hearing Nagase's voice, Taichi recognized he had become [Inaba].

"Was it really Taichi who became me? Ah~~Are you for real? Can't you withstand it? How little willpower you have."

This time it was [Taichi's] angry voice. For 80% she was Inaba. I could not be wrong about this.

"Yeah... I'm Taichi... By the way... How could you withstand this pain with just willpower?!..."

Taichi [Inaba] rinsed his mouth with tap water while moaning.

Although the teacher caught up with them in a flurry, Inaba [Taichi] said, "She's only a bit uncomfortable; she wasn't feeling very good this morning. I will bring her to the Health Room." The teacher didn't pry any more into the matter and hurried back to the classroom (probably because he wanted to go back to his lesson as soon as possible).

"Iori, you should also go back to the classroom. I will handle [this]."

"So I was saying... Inaba you should take care of your body... Didn't this scare the crap out of me?... Taichi, are you really okay?"

Nagase worriedly asked Taichi [Inaba].

"...Oh, it feels much better after I vomitted... Maybe I could go back to the classroom now."

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"Taichi, don't forget you are now using [Inaba's body]."

She said sternly as if teaching him.

"...You're right, sorry. After all, I'm in [someone else's body], I must be more careful..."

Taichi deeply thought about something obvious.

"If it was [someone else's body], right..."

Inaba [Taichi] said as if she wanted to say something more.

"I'm just worried at you two handling it yourselves... you don't care about your own problems... you should really go to the Health Room and have a rest; if you can't take it, don't push yourself, leave early. Understand? Any reply?"

Nagase told them like she was biding them a few times, and then she returned to the classroom.

"What's the bidding for? Do we look devoid of confidence?"

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To Taichi's [Inaba's] murmur, Inaba [Taichi] replied.

"You're right. So, let's head to the clubroom."

"...It just feels like what you said before contradicts with what you said now..."

Of course, there was nothing more to say—their destination was the clubroom.

When they had almost reached the clubroom, Taichi and Inaba's personality exchange ended.

"...I'm back," Taichi muttered lowly.

"Yeah," Inaba replied.

"What do we do now? Should we go to the Health Room? Though it's not impossible that another exchange should occur..."

Inaba was worried that others that were not in sight would switch to [her body], so she decided to enter the clubroom and not the Health Room.

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"If we go to the clubroom, there might be situations out of our expectations... Never mind, if we only need to sleep, the sofa in the clubroom is enough."

Inaba took the wristrest as a pillow and laid on the sofa. Even though if she straightened herself her thighs would be off the sofa, still, it was quite comfortable.

"Ahah, I gave you much trouble, Taichi. You should hurry back to class."

"Oh, you're right... How could I say that! You look so bad—how could I ditch you? Although I didn't have that vomiting feeling anymore, my body was still heavy and my head was still hurting."

" You told Iori you're fine! And please stop subtly reply to me and make another retort—it's disgusting."

"Don't call me disgusting! And please get well."

The two slightly fell into silence.

"If I'm like this, I'll give others unnecessary troubles... right? Sorry..."

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Inaba still gazed at the ceiling and said in a vanishing voice, which seemed to be crying.

"No, you won't give others unnecessary troubles... but you also feel uneasy, right? According to the timing of the personality exchange, everyone could happen to drop into circumstances like mine today... Or I might as well say health is essential, it has nothing to do with the personality exchange."

"Mmm...yeah."

Inaba vaguely replied and covered her eyes with her right hand.

It was rare that Taichi would get infuriated.

"Hey, Inaba... you must get well. You are obviously acting strange lately. You've collapsed before, and today this happened. Although you say that it's okay and we shouldn't worry, everyone knows that you know it's not okay—We will really become [Inaba], right? It's really worrying that Inaba was healthy until now, but your body worsened after the personality exchange started. If there is any reason, tell us, and then could we help you... If there is no relation with the personality exchange and this is only some kind of illness, at least tell us that you're

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'sick', okay? If you don't want to tell us, you can leave out the name of the sickness."

Maybe I did not have the right to tell her this, but after seeing her expression and attitude, I just could not leave her alone.

"...Please stop shouting noisily. You'll only make my head hurt even more."

She wanted to evade the problem again with a vague response.

"Inaba, I want to help you."

I'm not sure if my passion got through to Inaba, but she rose and sat upright—even though her body wasn't well, her pose was still elegant—she looked up at me, saying,

"Why do you want to help me...? Please don't tell me it's because 'I want to do it' or 'We are comrades'."

"Oh..."

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He originally planned to say this, but being said first by Inaba, he couldn't explain his reasoning right away and quickly thought of other topics.

"...Because Inaba is always thinking for us and caring for us, right? Although usually you look as if you're unwilling to do so, but in critical moments you would always help us, so this is your just return."

How's this? Taichi looked down at Inaba as if saying that.

Nevertheless, his speech was rejected by Inaba's nasally laugh.

"So, if I didn't help you and the others, then will you not help me? ...Also, please don't say such embarrassing things, you idiot."

"No, I will still help you... but the way you said that is too harsh."

"It's not harsh."

Inaba said flatly, not allowing Taichi to have the chance to mourn.

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"...Uh."

Correction: He could only mourn.

"But why would you and the others be so kind? I could never understand... If you would be more 'evil', there might be other changes... No, right, the one who needs to change is me, right?"

Inaba spoke of her emotions as if nothing has happened; her feeling was the most important thing Taichi had to pay attention to at the moment.

Then Taichi thought of something.

Speaking of which, Inaba has shown the gap in her heart multiple times, right?

Until now, Inaba had continuously made warnings, but Taichi...No, not only Taichi, but all of the other club members only took her warning as a warning directed to themselves.

Because the speaker was Inaba, because Inaba was that kind of a person, because Inaba was so excellent she doesn't need anyone to agonize for her, and because Inaba could always point out the wrong things in Taichi

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and the others... Did a person that could direct everyone to a better side actually have a seriously stereotyped personality ?

Taichi slowly commenced; he was also shivering in his own voice.

"Inaba... are... you okay?"

"...What's okay? If you're talking about my body, all I need is some rest."

"Not that... I'm talking about the condition this personality exchange has led us to."

Now maybe I showed a look of almost crying out yet filled with solemnness? Taichi thought.

To Taichi, Inaba suddenly eased her face's expression.

That was an extremely tender, gentle, warm, imperturbable, tranquil, and graceful smile.

Although Inaba does express her emotions on her face, her usual impression was as if she were hidden behind a mask; basically her changes of emotion were skin-deep. The current Inaba instead exposed her true and

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unmasked feelings, which were filled with insecurities. Maybe there were a lot more things to notice about her.

And then Inaba said,

"—How can I be okay."

Indeed.

Yes, what Inaba said also contained advice for Taichi and the other people.

But compared to those, perhaps she wants to disclose her fragile side? Does she want to tell us that it was because of her smartness that she was led to discomfort?

Inaba once said the situation was hopeless.

In other words, does this mean that Inaba feels that the situation was helpless?

But even though Taichi heard her say so, he could not come up with any conclusions. It was only now, when Inaba was hurt, that Taichi saw past the illusion of her seemingly impenetrable strength.

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Inaba was right. He, the self-sacrificing fool, was too oblivious. Inaba became like she is now because of the personality exchange but also because she did not recognize her comrades in the club.

She was cleverer than everyone, but because everyone knew she was clever, no one gave her the chance to release the fragile side of herself.

At this moment, Inaba's expression was dyed with a colour of surprise.

"Wait... What I just said doesn't count... Forget it."

Why didn't it count?

"No... that... what I meant by 'How can I be okay' is that it couldn't be not okay in this extreme situation, and not by how I handle the problem."

By looking at Inaba, who was finding farfetched excuses to defend herself, Taichi knew what cruel things he had done to Inaba.

"Because isn't Inaba the one who suffered the most pain during these personality exchanges?"

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How could I claim to be her companion if I was not even able to notice this.

Taichi's knees bent crudely and he sat on the floor weakly.

"It seems like... there was an exchange again... Ah~ What bad luck! Today just isn't my day... I even exposed my weaknesses to such an 'enemy'."

Inaba bit her nails irritably.

"In Inaba's opinion, am I... an 'enemy'?"

"No, I didn't mean that, you guys—"

Inaba stopped and her eyes went back and forth, clearly indicating her hesitation.

Although Inaba would say everything she wanted to, she would not expose her feelings so easily.

"—You guys are the most important 'companions' in the world to me. And that is why you are also my biggest 'enemies'."

---

Perhaps this was the first time Inaba revealed what she had never intended others to discover. The door to Inaba's heart was gradually opening. The meaning of 'enemy' in her sentence was—

"What does that—"

"This topic ends here."

Inaba explicitly said this, closing the door to her heart in a single breath.

"You've already said so much... You shouldn't run away from this now, Inaba. Well, since you admit that we are companions and you're willing to tell me, at least let me share some of your pain. I don't want to see that painful look on a companion!"

"Then close your eyes."

"That isn't the problem."

Does Inaba plan to withstand the pain by herself in the future?

---

Taichi could not condone that decision. Taichi already knew the truth.

Closing your eyes, running away from the problem or trying to get away from it—what could that possibly do?

Since the problem exists, we ourselves must accept it as it is and confront it; only then can we advance forward

.

This should be what we should do.

Taichi put his hands on his knees and stood up.

"People who don't understand each other's suffering shouldn't be called comrades."

Inaba's face twitched as if she were about to cry.

"But if I say it... then everything will end, so—"

"Although I don't know what lies beneath your words, I'm sure everything won't end because of them. Please stop despising people, Inaba."

Now, Taichi actually felt like Inaba was indeed a girl of his age.

She was strong, but at the same time she had a weaker side.

"How can you be so sure... You guys and I... are different, are completely different...! Furthermore that is.. . useless."

Inaba, visibly agitated, quivered and then gripped the leather on the sofa so intensely it could've been torn apart. If she were to use a little more force, her white and tender fingers might break.

Is this really okay?

Taichi questioned himself.

Maybe it is... Nonetheless, we must march forward. If we do not know what was the reason behind Inaba's actions, we cannot create any solutions for it. Even if he would be hurt, Taichi still wanted to be the first to stand at the starting point.

Thus he had a face with utterly no fear. He said,

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"Inaba, there will be absolutely no problems at all. Let me save you."

Should one be considered an ignorant dummy for saying things one couldn't do? But after his confession, Taichi knew he was slightly closer to reality.

Inaba looked at Taichi, potently clenched her fists, and slammed it on the wall, as if trying to destroy her body.

"How can you say that there won't be any problems to something you don't know about? I don't understand at all... Okay, let me tell you."

Inaba's eyes were strong and sharp—to the point that one could feel the hate held inside.

There will not be a problem, Taichi convinced himself.

"Th-There is no way I can trust in you guys."

She said something unexpected.

"The personality exchange between people... in other words, this means that 'one's body' and therefore their reputation would be possessed by someone else. Do you know what this implies?"

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Inaba's aggressive voice made Taichi back off.

"During the personality exchange, whether it be crime or something else, the sole responsibility of everything done lies upon the owner of the body. You could do anything and shirk all the responsibilities on someone else. You could kill, steal, or rape without consequence."

"But...if someone did this, they would give troubles to the owner of the body."

"Who gives a shit about what happens to someone else  
."

Inaba interrupted Taichi coldly.

"...Maybe the specific crimes I just mentioned were a bit off; but if we switch bodies when we're at home, we could still freely search around in the house and get a hold of their secrets or steal money, right?"

"Right... perhaps that could happen..."

"I can't help but imagine what you guys could be doing. Would my body be played with when it was possessed? Whenever I think about this, I get so scared that I can't even sleep at night."

Her under-eye bags looked deeper and more prominent than before.

"And the most important thing is, I, from my heart, hate myself for imagining these things. I feel that it would be better if I were to die... I know you guys are my companions so you won't do such things to me, but... really. Maybe this may sound awkward, but I hope you understand this... however, thinking and believing are two different things. Even though I think I can understand, I can't stop myself from believing that something might happen. So whenever I return to my body after an exchange, I would confirm whether anything happened to me. I'm scared... to let you see the ugly side of myself."

Inaba's soliloquy continued as if it were overflowing.

"I thought humans would more or less have that kind of side. That even though their expression tells others that they trust them, there would be some level of

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skepticism in their hearts; however, after these personality exchanges I knew that you guys really do believe in everyone, including me. You guys don't seem scared at all... Then what am I?"

It wasn't that she didn't want to believe in it; instead, she couldn't believe in it. She wanted to be trusted as well as trusting them in respect, but she just couldn't trust them. Of course, Taichi could only imagine what she was thinking, yet it sounded painful already. It must be much more painful for her.

"Still, Inaba... despite that, we still won't hate you."

That was right. Even though she would think like that, it could not change the fact that she was Inaba—

"Even though you won't suddenly hate me, you wouldn't get along with me like before, right?"

"About that—"

"At least I can't. I'm not freaky enough to tell those who trust in me 'I can't trust you guys' and act as if nothing had happened."

---

No matter what Taichi and the others thought, if Inaba says that was what she believes, then there was no way of saving her.

Inaba slowly breathed deeply, and then put her hand on her chest, as if her words needed much preparation.

"I don't trust anyone in this world; not even my family members. So everyone is my 'enemy'. And you guys are the biggest 'enemies' of them all, because maybe... if it weren't for my temperament, you guys would trust me more than anyone else would... If I completely distrust people, then maybe this would be better; but even though I don't trust people, I don't hate them either. I think that if I can act like a normal person and get along with each other joyously, then everything would be fine.. . But it's because of my indecisiveness that made me suffer each and every day."

"Ah~Ah", I finally said it—Inaba supplemented and laughed at herself.

"So—"

Taichi was speechless. As if she knew about his speechlessness, Inaba deliberately raised the corner of

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her mouth. This was a smile that would instantly cause a feeling of melancholy.

"On top of that, however you look, you won't find any ways to save me... Because I was that kind of person from the beginning."

Plugging towards a strange direction, Inaba continued to speak recklessly.

"I don't have any traumas like Yui or Iori... Frequently, characters in stories will become pessimistic after terrible experiences in their lives, right? Looking at them, one could sympathize for them. But to me, I think they are still blessed because they actually have a reason to become like that, right? If it was because of their trauma, they could still be saved, because we only have to come up with ways to solve their traumas—it's that simple; however, how can we help people who have no traumas? Their reason for being how they are is 'I'm born with that'. If this is the case, then they can't be helped. After all, their problems were with them since birth. If you want to correct it, then the only way is to make them be someone they're not... Don't you think that this is more dismal than anything else?"

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"I don't think I'm a female protagonist in a tragic story"—Inaba said and waved her hand in front of her face.

"What I'm going to say contains a lot of my personal opinions. I think that in reality, most people don't have explicit and dramatic traumas that could be written into stories. Of course, I wouldn't say that there weren't any external influences on me, but most people don't have many terrific opportunities, it's just the way they're born. If this were a story, the writer would prepare a way for them to tackle the obstacle, to show the reasons behind those obstacles and blend them into the story; but in fact, I think most cases of trauma in the real world don't have a solution, and were 'stories that couldn't be stories'. There aren't many salvations in this world... In this sense, maybe your self-sacrificing personality is also helpless. Weren't you like that when you're born?"

According to Inaba's theory, things will in fact become what she said. Things like rescues or salvations must be rare cases.

Besides, Taichi was also—

"You're right... There might be no such thing as salvation for those without traumas."

---



Taichi did not think what Inaba said was wrong, but—this didn't mean he thought it was right.

No, it should be said that he didn't want to think it was right, because if it were, the world would become too shallow.

Nevertheless, Taichi suddenly thought of something.

If I say this perhaps Inaba would get angry? Even though he had his doubts, Taichi still decided to continue because he knew that however things would turn out, he must march forward.

After all, Taichi made Inaba speak honestly about all the things she tried to hide with all her might—even after she collapsed. Therefore, he must shoulder this responsibility.

"That's because, however, that there is no need to be saved, right?"

Am I really too optimistic?

"Ah?"

Inaba thinned her eyes and looked at Taichi in surprise

"As I was saying, I think if humans had that kind of personality from the very start it wouldn't cause a big problem, right?"

Right, because this was a personality that God decided to give humans from their birth.

At the moment, Inaba couldn't understand what he implied, but as Taichi expected what he said seemed to infuriate her immediately.

Anger—her whole body was covered with anger for the moment.

"Oh... In other words, you are saying these trivial things are not worth agonizing about, right? Also, people who collapse because of them are mere idiots, right?"

Taichi felt a miasma so strong, he had ever experienced in his life.

"I-I didn't really say something *that* harsh, did I?"

He wanted to give in instantaneously.

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But he must confront it.

This world was not so naive that one could gain without getting hurt.

"Nevertheless, maybe at the end, that is what it is."

"Taichi!"

Inaba stood up, advanced a step forward in one gulp, and grabbed Taichi by the collar.

Surrounded by long, erotic eyelashes, her small yet long eyes were burning with emotion. Though her lips were pale, her cheeks were all red. Her expression, veiling none of her strong emotions, accompanied by her intrinsic beauty, produced an unbelievable forcibleness even in her current condition.

Until now, Taichi had thought unilaterally that Inaba's inner side was as strong as her facade, but now it was different; he knew even if she was Inaba, she still had her fragile side.

His neck was clinched so hard that breathing was difficult, but Taichi paid it no mind and kept speaking.

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"Or I may as well say... What's wrong with... an Inaba like that?"

Inaba looked stricken.

"No... It is depressing that you're not willing to trust us , but I think you don't need to change yourself just because of that... I think everyone would still accept your authentic self... even if our way of communication would be altered."

Taichi's neck was pulled even harder.

"That kind of a person... If it were me, I wouldn't accept it...!"

Inaba showed a painful look as if being forced into desperation.

So Taichi told her undoubtedly.

"I accepted it."

Her hands loosened up.

"What... are you talking about..."

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"As I was saying before, didn't I already accept you? Also... Nagase, Kiriya and Aoki will be fine with it. Everyone will accept you; just try, will you? Then your agonies will be relieved. Besides, if you could change your attitude with such determination, you could also adopt self-defense measures, couldn't you? With that, everything can be solved."

"Are-Are you an idiot? How could things go so easily!"

Inaba screamed surprised in strong awe rather than anger.

"But maybe it would go so easily."

"You... But to do something so risky... How could I?! If they don't accept me, then what should I do?"

To tell the truth, the right answer should be "you will have to deal with it".

Yet, Inaba was now outright asking for opinion and help despite her usual flaunting . Taichi believed he must think of a way to help her. But he could not successfully find an answer that yelled "this is it!" to him.

"Even so, you still have me; isn't that alright?"

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"What...!"

Inaba was speechless; at the same time, she backed two steps.

"Do you... really say these things thoughtlessly ?... Is that instinctive...?!"

Inaba widened her eyes as if seeing a freak.

But Taichi thought, "you shouldn't be so shocked, right ...?"

"Essentially, you must first accept yourself; no one can help you with this."

No matter how you want to change, the first step is to accept yourself.

"...I can't believe I'm being taught by Taichi."

Inaba moved back a few steps again, and when her thighs collided with the sofa she sat down like she was collapsing. Going with the momentum, she laid down on the sofa and hid her face into her arms.

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This was the first time Taichi saw her truly defenceless and without her guard up.

Taichi thought, "let her rest a bit now", and sat down on a chair.

He felt that they would just skip the fourth lesson.

There were a few hundred students having lessons at school. And in this room there were only two people so it was extremely relaxing. Although Taichi didn't know the reason and he could not express it clearly in his words, he thought, "If Inaba shared the same thought as me then it'd be nice."

At this moment, Inaba suddenly jumped up from her curling pose.

"Certainly... this won't work!"

"Why?"

"As I've said before... I can't expose my ugly side to others. No matter what I do, I can only see failure."

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Inaba covered her face and drooped her head. Her usual arrogance and confidence disappeared.

"But it's fine with me—"

"To project how Taichi thinks onto everyone else is too hard."

...I feel I was indirectly called a 'freak'.

So, what should I do—At this moment, Taichi came up with another idea.

"...Hey, Inaba, I think that if one were to think that if someone discovered what they were hiding, they'd be done for, they would, perhaps, blow the situation out of proportion."

"Your words of comfort—"

"So I'm deciding to tell you a secret I originally planned to take with me to the grave."

"Eh?"

Inaba was visibly in awe again for the nth time today.

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"This secret, if known, would disrupt my high school life; in fact, socially, I would be sentenced to death or lose my identity as a human—it's a super dangerous secret that is crazy enough to frighten me to this extent..."

I said this explicitly , but I could not stop my voice from trembling.

Was it really okay to choose this path? If I fail, this might become tragic rather than a comical. Though it was too late to turn back, Taichi started to feel a bit insecure.

"...By the way, what good does it do me if you unveil your secret... Do you plan to say 'I've said my secret, so you should also say yours'...?"

"Absolutely."

Inaba stood up, expressions twitching, walking straight to Taichi.

"Ouch!"

She pushed the long table ferociously!

"Wuah!"

The long table hit Taichi's abdomen! What are you doing.

"What is your brain~ made of~!"

That was a howl that would freeze people in an instant

"...Your voice is too loud, Inaba. Although there is some distance between the recreational building and the main building, the students are still in their lessons..."

Inaba knocked the table \*bam\* with her fist.

"Ayahh~ How do I put it, there are many things that have been infuriating me, so I've accumulated quite a bit of stress. What just happened put me at my limit."

Her sadistic eyes brightened up fiercely.

"So please, tell me your secret first...!"

A sourly smile floated on Inaba; this was the real her... Wouldn't it be better if she did not return to her original self? Taichi really wanted to believe his senses were wrong.

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"Now... you must promise me you will also be honest to the other club members—"

"Tell me first, and then I will decide. At least I've already told you some kind of secret."

Taichi swallowed hard nervously. To be frank, to unveil his secret was too scary.

Because it was a taboo subject that should never be discussed with girls.

Taichi wanted to escape... Though, he convinced himself to take the first step.

Let me first solve the problem at hand. I don't care what happens later.

"So...I'm going to tell you now..."

This was the greatest nervousness I had ever experienced in my life. My whole body felt numb. I felt that all the contents of my stomach were going to pour out.

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Taichi didn't know if Inaba was shocked at Taichi's unusual look, but he saw a taut face on Inaba, battle-ready.

Taichi prepared himself.

"I've... masturbated to you before."

Time stopped.

The air in the room froze as if the temperature were absolute zero.

Taichi's body couldn't move an inch. If he were to move, the numb air would melt and spread away. He wanted Inaba to delay her reaction.

But time surely would not stop.

"...What you said about masturbating to me...Are you referring to that kind of **masturbation**?"

Inaba asked.

".....Yeah, it's that **masturbation**."

"Oh really? I see... so you used me as your... so this means that Iori and Yui were also used as...?"

...Although his intestines hurt like tearing apart, Taichi could not help but to nod to admit it.

"Is that so? So Taichi treats girls of the same grade like this, and exploits them..."

With a still tone and an organized mind, Inaba was scarier than any living thing that ever existed.

"...You took me as... Bah! Gegege, gahahahahaha!"

Inaba held her stomach and burst into laughter. She laughed so hard it disordered her breathing, while she sat inversely on the sofa and slapped \*pang, pang\*.

"Oi... oi... I rarely do it! And almost I've never done it... Are you listening?"

Although Taichi didn't look in the mirror, he knew his face has turned all red.

"Ah~hahaha... Ah... I've laughed too much this is getting painful... Gegege."

Inaba finally stopped laughing. She wiped her tears and gasped as if having finished a marathon.

She wiped her tears a few times again and breathed deeply. Despite this, she didn't seem to have laughed enough and couldn't get a hold of herself when she thought about it. But in the end she grudgingly calmed her body down.

Then she spoke loudly in a tone filled with disgust, displeasure and despise.

"Per~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ vert!"

This word brought an impulse like a clear ferocious cut done by a large axe.

"You pervert, lecherous<!—dirty--> dog, freak, psycho, shit, maggot, brute, bitch in heart!"

Just these verbal attacks could have nailed me to death , Taichi thought.

"...Guwaguuu..."

He could not even speak like a human.

I am a goner; this method certainly is—

"But..."

But at this moment, Inaba's cold look was suddenly relieved like she was pleased.

"—What's wrong with a Taichi like that?"

She said and smiled.

"No, I might as well say, Taichi is like that... If you are a boy in puberty, this is natural. By the way, you're bold to say such things... If you don't do it right, you'll be arrested... It's only me that you're okay with. Please don't tell this to other girls, you idiot."

"As I was saying... the secret that I was hiding is now in extreme danger! And I could only tell these things to you."

"Only to me, huh?... Should I be happy about that?... By the way, this is stupid in so many ways! To blurt that secret out was stupid; to think that letting others hear it and feel that it'll be okay was stupid; to actually hear it

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but think it'll be okay was also stupid... and the most stupid thing was to be touched by it..." <!—she switches from describing him to describing herself-->

Inaba looked upwards, wiping her tears as if saying "I must not cry". Despite this, her actions were a bit late, so she could only incessantly rub her eyes with the collar of her shirt.

"Th-this was that! It's just the tears that were in my eyes when I laughed!"

Taichi thought, "Are you a kid?" But then he realised she is, in fact, a child... Inaba is still only a child.

So there will be many times we will suffer in pain; we cannot always walk by ourselves; sometimes, we will need someone to help us out. Nevertheless, even if we become adults, this might will not change.

"Well I may as well say: as a girl you should bring a handkerchief."

Taichi walked to Inaba's side and handed her a handkerchief.

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"...What are you doing... only capable of doing such dumb things... Are you planning to make *me* fall for you too?..."

They wanted to do it as soon as possible so they quickly called the CRC members.

They decided to meet in the clubroom during the lunch break.

Until then, Inaba, whose face was as red as a cooked octopus, said to Taichi, "Forget that I cried and all that other nonsense that I said! If you want to live then do it~!" She forcibly told Taichi to forget her embarrassing acts.

After that, the bell rang at the end of the fourth lesson, which marks the arrival of the lunch break—

"—That was what happened."

Inaba told her long-hidden secrets and agonies to Nagase, Kiriyama and Aoki. Although she was running away before, she was still Inaba. When she was determined, she could do everything straightforwardly.

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Her words aside, Inaba did not actually toss away her discomfort and fear; her legs slightly quivered when she spoke.

I think it is fine. I said it would be fine. Even though Inaba was that kind of a person, those three will still accept you. Taichi deeply believed that, and pried at their responses as if praying. If everything does not go as expected and the worst happens, how am I going to apologise to Inaba? No, before that, what will the Cultural Research Club become?

If it were these members, however, I am sure—

The three kept silent (because Inaba told them to). The first to commence was Iori.

"Inaban, in other words, you mean—"

She stopped.

Inaba nervously shook her body.

What words would Iori weave after hearing my confession?

"—You like to worry, don't you?"

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That was... unimaginably unexpected.

"L-like to worry... Iori, have you heard me say... this isn't a problem that can be solved with this phrase..."

Inaba murmured in astonishment.

Then it was Kiriyama who spoke.

"I can understand~ I'm the same. If I exchanged with Aoki, after I return to my body, the first thing I do is to check every corner of my body and then see if any of my personal belongings are gone."

"I'm hurt! What you just said really hurt me! Why must it be me! What about Taichi?"

Kiryama replied, "Be quiet! I'm judging by our usual conduct," and crushed Aoki in a loud voice.

"Don't... you guys have other comments?..."

"Mmm... Inaba's thoughts were quite startling<!—sudden-->—like crime and whatnot. But you needn't worry, I have a conscience and ethics and values, so I won't do those things. I'm the kind of person that won't even cross at a red light!"

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Kiriyama puffed out her chest with pride, while making a pose that was suitable for the sound effect \* hehe\*.

Although there were discrepancies between them, after the talk, they knew Kiriyama had a similar problem. She also didn't deny Inaba's way of thinking and naturally accepted her.

"Or I may say it's everyone that Inaba couldn't believe in, not just me!" said Aoki.

Inaba talked as if being forced into desperation, "Should we take this so seriously...?"

"This is most important; other matters don't matter!"

Aoki was even resolved that other matters did not really matter.

The aforementioned were the various reactions of the Cultural Research Club.

"So, what I have to say to Inaba is—the most important thing is—"

Iori used an abnormally formal tone and, getting everyone's attention, said,

"—rushing back to the classroom to grab your lunch box."

She brought a red-and-white checkered lunch box bag to her face and waved it around, then showed the most serious expression of the day.

"Yes, that's right."

"Yeah."

Kiriyama and Aoki also nodded their assent.

"Okay, it's decided then. Now go get it! Taichi, you too! I'm getting hungry!"

Nagase pushed Inaba and Taichi on their backs and forced them outside the clubroom. During this turbulence, Nagase whispered to Inaba some things Taichi couldn't hear.

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Maybe it was because her brain's processing time didn't catch up with the situation, but Inaba had a lost look while she faltered towards the classroom. She then commenced talking again during their walk.

"Compared to lunch, were my agonies, which almost pulverized me, less important? Wasn't this too flippant?!"

What she said was right.

Nevertheless, according to the differences of how we look at things, maybe her agony wasn't that big a deal. After all, something like 'the innate character of a person' merely deserves that kind of attention.

"Ah, I'm feeling silly... all the problems that my heart was wrenching about and all the things that I thought were embarrassing, what now..."

If that was what Inaba thought, the problems which have haunted her so will now become trivial matters.

This will be fine... Taichi thought.

"...Forget it; after all, I've gotten hold of the secret that can manipulate your high school life."

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...Even though Inaba can forget it, Taichi could not.

"Hey... Inaba, if you can, I hope you burn it into a deep corner in your memory... No, it would be better if you can wipe it from your memory completely—"

"No."

...It looks like my remaining days of high school life can only pass successfully by obeying to her.

Ah... Taichi sighed as if he would fall down at any time. Inaba exploded in laughter while slapping his back.

After that, she stopped and put her hand lightly on Taichi's shoulder.

"I won't forget it, but instead, let me also tell you a secret; then we'll be equal."

Inaba moved closer towards Taichi and leaned close to his ears.

A sweet aroma like honey exuded from her body.

"I've also masturbated to you before."

She said while spitting out a soft and lukewarm breath

"What the... you..."

Because of shame, anxiety and fear, Taichi entered into a panic.

In other words, this represents... that thing... will become this... will become like... this is what happened

As if enjoying his discomfort, Inaba kept crackling.

## Chapter 9 : A Confession and the Arrival of Death

"By the way, what's going on between you and Iori?!"

Just arriving to school the next morning, Inaba had completely recovered over the weekend. She seemed to be even healthier and livelier than before, to a point that gave Taichi a headache.

"N-Nothing, really."

Even after Inaba's confession, there weren't many changes in the Cultural Research Club.

Also, recently, everyone has developed immunity to the personality exchange. There weren't any big hurdles to leap over even if an exchange occurred. Although they were still nervous during the exchange and knew that bombs might explode any minute, they still had some kind of 'imperturbability'.

Was that what «Fuusenkazura» expected? If it were, then this means that this condition will continue on for a period of time. But if it was not, then what will happen?

Iori was the only person that Taichi worried about.

"After you two took me back home, you guys talked about a lot of things, right? So I was thinking there might be some changes after a while, and I waited... in the end, nothing happened! Crap. Do only your sexual desires pass the test?"

"Inaba, don't say something like 'sexual desires' on such a fine morning, okay? And I feel that once you talk about these subjects you would carelessly expose 'that secret'. So, in some sense, please don't say it!"

She would not just stop now.

"You should understand that Nagase is in extreme danger."

"Mmm... I understand... Actually, why do you know this?"

"Because Iori and I have secrets that I did not tell you about. When the time comes, maybe I will. But that doesn't matter now. Tsk, I actually didn't want to do this, but there is no other choice now... I can only use brutal therapy!"

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A therapy so brutal that it made even Inaba reluctant to do it—how shocking would that be... Taichi didn't want to even imagine it.



During lunch break at a empty spot somewhere in school, there were a number of silhouettes lurking behind the East Building. Because of its inconspicuous geographical position, it (allegedly) became the place for confessions.

First, hiding under the bushes of a tree, in order, were Taichi, Inaba, and Nagase. In front of them were Kiriyma Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi who were planning for a rendezvous.

"Inaba... Where did you hear of this news...?"

Taichi, who had lowered his body, asked Inaba, who was at his side with the same posture.

"I discovered it by chance when I exchanged with Yui recently... Ah, words aside, I didn't intentionally spy into her phone! It's because when I exchanged Aoki sent her a message. I couldn't help but take a look."

"Still, you shouldn't use that kind of knowledge during these times... like, you should pretend you didn't see it even if you had—"

"Every piece of info that I know is a treasure of mine! Of course, I couldn't do that in general areas of common sense, and I wouldn't; but what does this have to do with general... I assume."

"If this have nothing to do with the general then what does? Also, what did you assume?"

"Quiet. They started to talk!"

Nagase stopped them from debating.

Nagase and Taichi were practically dragged here by Inaba, but when Yui and Aoki arrived, Nagase was in high spirits and passionately observed what happened.

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"What's the matter... and calling me to such a place. We're in the same class and the same club. We have time to chat whenever, don't we? I want to have my lunch."

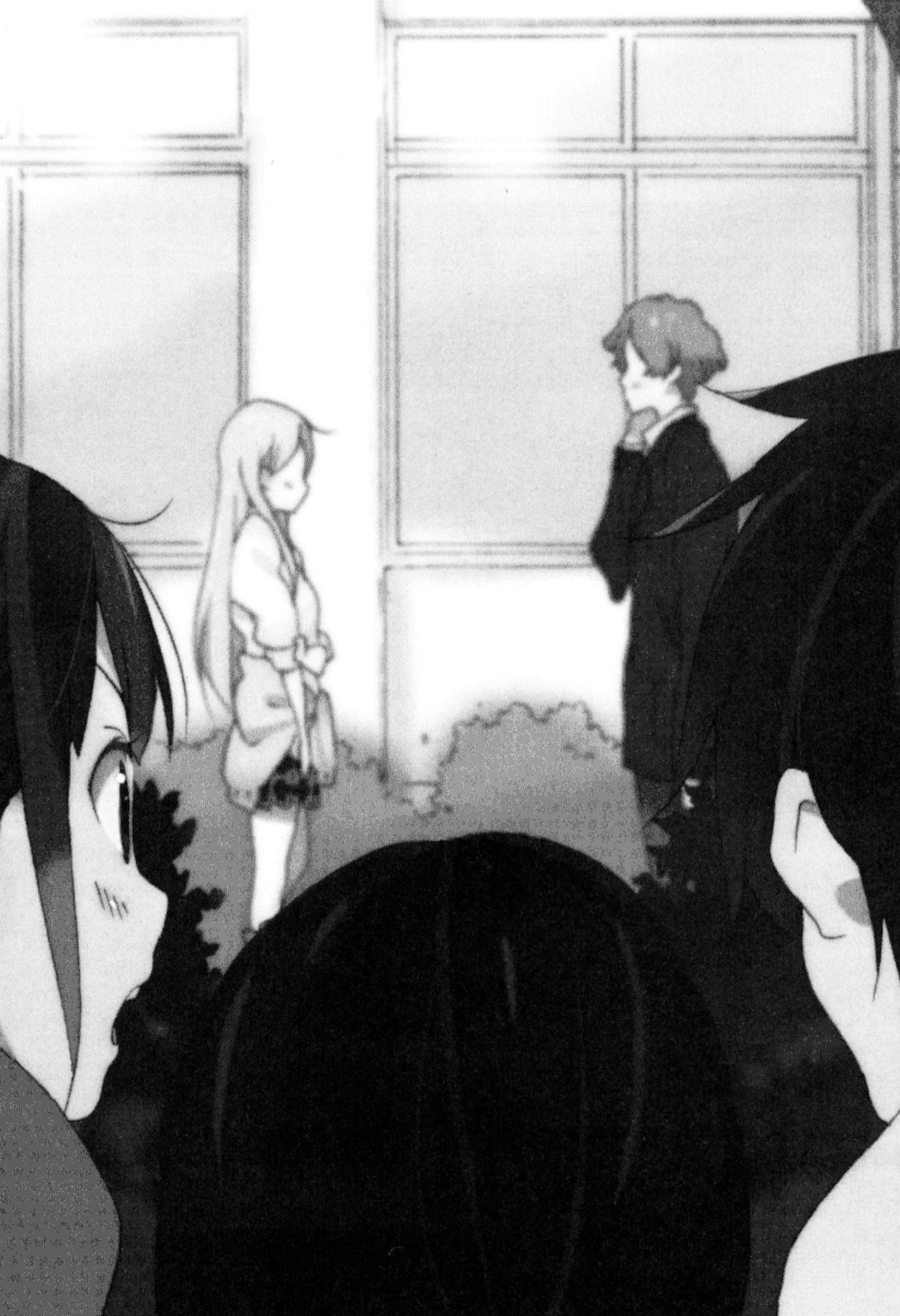
Kiriyama was dissatisfied, but her voice was a bit nervous. Though there was a fair distance between Taichi and them, because of the quietness of their surroundings, listening to what they were saying was easy.

"I have something serious to tell you."

Aoki's tone was very serious, quite different from his usual one.

"W-what's the matter...?"

Not knowing what to do, Kiriyama fidgeted and spoke as if she would escape at any time.



Aoki seemed to notice her behaviour and spoke determinedly and distinctively,

"Maybe you would think it's a bit late, but I still need to say this again—I like Kiriyama Yui-san; if you are willing, please go out with me."

This confession could be said perfect and direct.

"Ohoh... Although Aoki commonly says that he 'likes' her, for him to say these things so explicitly requires a certain amount of bravery...! Splendid...!"

Even Inaba couldn't help but become amazed. At her side, Taichi and Nagase were speechless.

It was so nervewracking just to watch from the side... Kiriyama, who is involved in the confession, must have experienced an impulse much greater than they could ever imagine.

"Wuwu, slower... What are you saying... Awawa—"

Upon hearing sounds that didn't form words, Kiriyama's face instantaneously turned all red.

"Wu~ ~ ~ ~ what the heck! What is wrong with you!"

"What are you saying? I said I like you so I confessed..."

"But you always say you like me, so this shouldn't be called a confession, right? Besides, when you did similar things before I remember I rejected you!"

"But my heart hadn't changed at all. Also, I think you haven't changed yours—"

"No! No way... now... is not the time..."

Kiriyama's voice slowly diminished and she drooped her head in depression.

"I know this, but at least we could cultivate our relationship bit by bit, couldn't we?"

Aoki did not know what was stupid or smart; what was crazy or genius. He did not think of anything or maybe he had already seen the essence of things.

"F-Firstly, I was thinking, why is it me? Compared to me, Iori is a lot cuter. Her body is finer and she's

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gorgeous and optimistic. Also, Inaba is beautiful. She has the body of a model and she's smart... a lot better than me... who's short and without breasts, and also stupid... Although Taichi once said to me 'I think you have a lot of potential in the loli market'..."

Inaba and Nagase quickly turned to Taichi. They stared at him, as if criticising him, while poking him with bamboo sticks.

"Hey... This doesn't mean I'm a lolicon. What I said is just a general opinion..."

Both of them still used the same suspicious eyes and stared at Taichi speechlessly. Taichi felt he could not get away with their suspicion for now.

"No, no. you have a lot of pros! Like you're cute, optimistic, chaste, and a bit childish... there's a lot more, but it doesn't matter, because it's my intuition. At the moment when we met, I felt I will like Yui, and I did. I still like you that much."

"Hmm... Ah... Eh?"

Facing Aoki who had entered serious mode, Kiriyama was flustered and at her wit's end.

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Trying to calm herself down, she breathed deeply twice with her whole body.

"Fu... So, why did you wait until now to say this?"

"Yui, you... How do you feel about Taichi?"

"I... Wuhu—"

Inaba fleetly covered Taichi's opening mouth which was about to shriek.

"This is such a surprising development... just like a Shurabu<sup>[7]</sup>... Eh, excuse me."

"Baha! Y-your ability to suppress people is abnormally strong! I thought I would suffocate!"

Taichi shouted as loud as he could while keeping his voice down to produce the biggest protest.

"Hush! We'll get discovered!"

From then on, the quietest person was maybe Nagase.

"What do I feel? Why... should I say this...?"

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"You shouldn't be dull enough to not know the reason.  
.. since you're not Taichi."

"...From that I feel like I'm subtly being insulted... Was  
this my misconception?"

Taichi muttered in complaint.

Kiriyama tied and loosened the chestnut hairs on her  
fingers and repeated this action.

After a while of playing with her hair, she seemed to  
have made her decision and lightly put her hand down.

Then she stood straight and said,

"I like Taichi!"

"Hm...Wume—" "Hm...Muwu—"

Inaba covered both the mouths beside her that were  
about to shriek.

"—as a friend."

"Eh?"

"What do you mean by 'Eh?'? What opinion do you have?"

"So I was saying, she scared the shit out of me... Yui deliberately kept me in suspense."

Inaba capriciously complained even though she was the one who invaded onto someone else's privacy.

"B-By the way, what do you think of me? I'm just asking..."

"As a friend, I hate you."

"Is this for real?"

"...Of course I'm joking! I have a lot of dissatisfactions, but I wouldn't simply hate someone that is willing to say they like me."

Kiriyama seemed to successfully bring the conversation to her own pace and started to become more eloquent.

"Or may I say... if I were to choose from like or hate, I would choose like... but in the terms of a friend!"

Kiriyama used her whole body to emphasize on the last

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part. "All I can say now... is only that... so I'm sorry. I can't go out with you now. In fact, I can't go out with anyone at the moment!"

Even though Taichi observed them from a distance, he could still feel the sincerity of Kiriyama.

"Is that so? I understand now... Thank you for giving me a clear response... I surely needed a head-on confirmation! By the way, I'm good to go after knowing that there is still a possibility!"

"Y-Yeah... On top of that, if considering the rank of my male friends, Taichi is a lot higher than you."

"What! Taichi is certainly my biggest rival... Yui, however, you have changed a lot. Before you wouldn't say such things..."

"Because I can't stay at the same place forever; I must march forward... Alright, the talk is over. Let's head back to the classroom for our lunch!"

Kiryama turned away and walked towards the school building. She walked large steps firmly and securely. Because of her small body her steps weren't as large as they seem.

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"Eh? So you mean you're inviting me to eat with you?"

"No! My friends are still waiting for me!"

The voices of the two gradually diminished until it was inaudible.

The first person to stand up from the three who were hiding all along was Inaba.

"...So, it was fortunate that we could spy on them thanks to this exchange. Although I knew it would end like this, it was just my speculation after all."

Indeed.

Taichi also stood up.

"How should I put it... what this is..."

Nagase still sat on the floor without moving. She seemed to be pondering over something.

"Let's go, Nagase."

Taichi put his hand forward to Nagase. Nagase blinked in surprise and stared at his hand.

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After a while, Nagase lightly smiled; at the same time, Taichi felt as if 'something important' was starting to melt and 'that something' had started to boil.

"I'm fine."

That being said, Nagase stood up by herself and did not draw support from Taichi's hand.



That day after school, Taichi was left in the Cultural Research Club alone.

The class meeting of Aoki and Kiriyama's class, class 1A, seemed to have been extended. On the other hand, Nagase and Inaba were called for as the representatives of the Cultural Research Club.

Although he was doing revisions and preparations on the desk, he was a little out of it, and he knew it. Moreover, his conscious—

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At this moment, someone opened the door and came in.

She was Nagase and she looked around the clubroom.

"Is only Taichi here?"

"Oh, yes..."

Her look was different from usual.

"Mmm, after all, the class meeting of class 1A hasn't ended yet."

Nagase said, and sat on the sofa solemnly with a straight back.

"...Are you Inaba?"

[Nagase's] face twitched and her eyebrows lifted.

"Yeah..."

"So, where did [Inaba's body] go? Had the personality been exchanged with Nagase?"

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"Na.... Iori exchanged with me when [I] had something to do. But it was something Iori could also handle so there should be no problem."

"Thanks. Even though we are in such a club, being a member still brings about a lot of duties."

"Maybe not. By the way—"

—By the way—[Nagase] said again. She hesitated for a long time.

"What did you feel about Yui and Aoki during the lunch break?"

"What do I feel... Why do you ask now?"

"Please don't mind it. Also, you can't possibly have no feelings."

"Mmm... right. But... maybe because I have no opportunity like them so it feels as if they are in a separate world. To be honest, I didn't have any special thoughts, but I feel it is quite terrific. Though I don't know whether this was my thoughts to the two of them or thoughts in other areas."

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He had a feeling of being shocked, but the feeling was too bright he could not successfully grasp it.

[Nagase] did not have much response to Taichi's answer and only murmured "Oh..."

"Or I may say what's your point in letting us watch that scene?"

Taichi asked.

[Nagase] widened her eyes and had a look that felt like saying she could not believe Taichi did not know.

"Taichi... Do you really not know why I let you see that?"

"Eh—"

Having heard that, Taichi thought back about what had transpired.

Do I really not know what it was for?

Was it that I knew but I pretended I did not?

—If so, then what was it for?

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"Arghh... forget it. So, let us get straight to the point—"

—"Let us get straight to the point", [Nagase] repeated and hesitated for a while.

"So... What do you feel about Iori?"

This question poked right at Taichi's chest.

"...Inaba, you're same as before—your words hit the nail right on the head... Also when you use [Nagase's] appearance to speak, my feelings become more entangled."

Taichi did not know what he said was right, but he still tried to use a casual tone.

Because he thought if only he could do that his wounds would get slightly veiled.

"Isn't this the perfect timing?"

[Nagase] showed an intentional smile that was more rigid than usual.

"Where is it perfect... How do I put it; I..."

Why should I reply to such a question? This thought flashed through Taichi's mind suddenly.

But when he noticed it, he had already spoken.

"I think our relationships now are on the right track. I don't wish to destroy our relationships... but... nevertheless—"

At this moment,

The door of the clubroom opened again. [Inaba] came in and said—

"Hi, Iori. About that thing you told me, because the teacher is not around, so let's... what's the problem?"

After that, [Nagase], who said she was Inaba and was sitting on the sofa, said,

"Inaban, you came back too quickly—"

[Nagase] looked at Taichi's face with sudden shock.

What is going on—

Taichi felt confused...

He thought the inner personality of the person sitting on the sofa with [Nagase's appearance] was Inaba, as she had said; and the person now entering with [Inaba's appearance] was Nagase—but it seems that the person at the door with [Inaba's appearance] had not experienced the personality exchange and completely maintaining Inaba's attitude; and she also called the person with [Nagase's appearance] as Nagase; And that person who had the [Nagase's appearance] also used called her as 'Inaban', a name which only Nagase would call Inaba—

In other words, this means...

"—You've been fooled!"

[Nagase], who was sitting on the sofa, had not actually experienced the personality exchange and was the real Nagase Iori. She tried to run away past Inaba but Inaba quickly got hold of her hand.

"What's wrong with you? Iori!"

"Inaban! Let go of me!"

"How can I leave someone who is crying... Hey, ah!"

Nagase shook off Inaba's hand rudely and ran away from the clubroom.

Inaba left the room in a flurry too to catch up, but she came back to the clubroom after dozens of seconds.

"Crap! If she runs seriously, I can't catch up to her...! After all, her physical ability is abnormally good. By the way, Taichi~~! What have you done!"

Inaba fiercely walked towards Taichi and twitched him by the collar.

"Wu... How do I know...! I'm not sure, but Nagase pretended she exchanged with you... and then she—"

"Pretend to be me... what's that?"

"So I was saying, Nagase pretended her personality was yours and fooled me! After that you came in... and that's what happened."

Taichi also didn't know what is about—No, not right.

Taichi knew the reason.

Didn't he agreed with Nagase that he could absolutely do it?

And hadn't he told her to believe in him?

Didn't he say that 'whatever condition he was in, he could always know that Nagase is Nagase'?

Was Nagase testing him?

No, that should not be right.

Test?

What nonsense was I saying?

When should I stop using my self-centred way of thinking?

"Nagase, she... wanted to try to believe she, didn't she!"

Taichi was indignant of his failure to respond to Nagase's anticipation.

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He was scared that his relationship would be spoiled so he did not dare walk forward but escaped without further thinking. Nagase must not have wanted to see Taichi like that, which made her advance in such a way.

Inaba loosened her hand which was grabbing Taichi by the collar and put it down.

"Seems like you know it clearly yourself."

"Yeah... I'm very clear I'm the worst guy of all."

"Oh... May I punch you?"

"How did you come up... No, please punch—bahō!"

Before Taichi finished, Inaba fiercely slapped his right cheek.

"Ouch... Y-You... No, thank you. It can cheer me up."

Do not be afraid and escape. Confront it! March forward! Resist it with all my might!

This time it was my turn to advance—to use my largest sincerity to respond to Nagase who was willing to believe in me.

Will others laugh at someone who had failed before?

But even if someone is laughed at, it does not matter; because no matter how people scoff at them, they could still march forward from failure.

"...How stupid are you guys? It's so surprising! I can't stand you guys anymore." Inaba lay on the sofa. "Okay, get outta here. After all, the person she's looking for isn't me."

Inaba did not look at Taichi and waved her hand like driving a dog away.

"...Understood."

My failure hurt Nagase, so I must shoulder this fact and face myself gallantly to express my thoughts clearly. Taichi prepared himself and left the clubroom.

At last, for a moment Taichi looked back to where Inaba was.

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But Inaba had firmly decided not to look at him.



Rushing down the stairs in a single breath, Taichi discovered a huge problem.

"Where did... Nagase go...?"

Okay, let me first run to the school building.

At that moment, a person belligerently stood looking at him.

Her hair bundled behind her, her spectacles flashed with brightness, and her whole body exuded the style of sublimity.

She was the class president of class 1C—Fujishima Maiko.

She quickly moved and blocked Taichi from going forward.

There was not time to mind Fujishima, Taichi thought..

"Yaegashi-kun!"

But she was calling him obviously, so he could not just leave.

"Haha.... Haha.... What's the matter... Fujishima...?  
I-I'm in a hurry..."

"Did you make Nagase-san cry?"

She hit the nail right on his head.

"Ah, yeah..."

Fujishima advanced on step forward to Taichi.

"Although I'm not sure of the reason, but boys who make weak girls cry must first suffer a slap on the face. Have you prepared yourself?"

Fujishima told Taichi some rules as if they were universal, but Taichi has never heard of them.

"What is... No, I'm willing to suffer for it."

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This kind of punishment was obvious, and if Fujishima would get out of the way if I said this...

"Nyaaa? Isn't your left cheek already red and swollen? That side was already hit."

"Y-yeah...this was just—Wuah!"

His left cheek was slapped again.

"Wu~ ~ My left side was already red and swollen. You should have hit the right side, shouldn't you? Moreover, you slapped me so hard I think I'm getting introduced to a new level of pain!"

Taichi found out through this that Fujishima Maiko was a super sadist.

"By the way, do couples really consist of a boy and a girl? What do you think, Yaegashi-kun?"

He could not grasp the intention of her question.

"About that, Fujishima, I don't have the time to discuss these things with you..."

Taichi stepped out to his right but Fujishima moved with the same distance to block him.

"Don't you think dropping out of those preconceptions and entering a world where you can love those you like seem more ideal?"

Taichi this time moved to the left by two steps... but Fujishima moved with the same distance and kept a poker face.

"But to think that unilaterally is impossible! To speak the truth, for one to love someone else must one be first loved by that someone—this is important. Please remember this."

Fujishima threw out a key that was clung to a red ornament. Looking from its shape, it was likely the keys for a bicycle.

"You go to school by tram, right? Let me lend this to you."

"Eh?"

"It looks like you're the person Nagase-san needs, not me; so chase her, quick! She ran to the left after she got out the front door."

Taichi was puzzled to her unexpected suggestion and looked at the keys on his hands.

"Fujishima... Is this okay?"

"There is nothing to worry about; because this is crucial to Nagase-san now, so it's obvious, right?"

"Is there anything more important than stopping her sorrowful tears?" Fujishima complemented and headed to the bicycle parking lot as if smartly saying 'follow me'.  
"

There should be a limit to her smartness.

I almost fell for her.

"Ah... And one more thing, because you seem to have mistook me so let me say this first. I... am fine with boys too."

Fujishima Maiko declared she was fine with both boys and girls.

Taichi rode on the bicycle Fujishima used to go to school and sped through the town. Although he had phoned Nagase a few times as he went down the road, he failed. She seemed to have turned off her phone or her phone had run out of battery.

An hour passed like a blink of an eye.

Taichi never thought that finding someone in town was this hard.

"After all, she walked on foot, so she shouldn't have gotten too far... Her things are still in the clubroom, so she wouldn't have gone back home. Maybe I should first go back to school for now..."

Just when Taichi was thinking and passing through the river that divided the town,

The sad and sorrowful sunset looked like it silhouetted against a person.

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That person had a strong sense of existence which was shown under the beautiful sight.

Her small limbs; Her bundled hair which fluttered in the wind.

A person that would appear as the protagonist in a movie—Nagase Iori.

The slight strong wind blew and Nagase turned back a bit to escape from the wind. As if seeing Taichi from the corner of her eye, she widened her eyes in surprise.

"Tai-Taichi—Wa!"

"Look out!"

Nagase lose her balance on the fence—but she balanced herself again at the critical moment.

Taichi broke out in a cold sweat. She would not die, but the water was quite distant from her and there was a concrete wall against the river so it would not be easy to climb up.

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"I-I was really scared... By the way, why are you here..."

Nagase jumped down after a semi-turn on the fence and stood in front of Taichi.

There were traces of tears that were left on her eyes.

Taichi's chest started to ache.

He parked his bicycle at the side of the road and gallantly bowed to apologise.

"I'm sorry for not noticing you yet promising you... I said it so heroically but I failed so badly..."

"What we call humans... What is what we call 'myself'? Even if our inner personalities changed, if we kept our original behaviour, others wouldn't find out. I thought that but I also discovered that if we try to emulate someone else, we could become someone we're not... Ah, I'm not blaming you! You have done nothing wrong! This completely is my fault... I'm sure anyone would've believed me under these conditions since we believed in

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each other and had established relationships based on trust... So, I'm really sorry. I wouldn't do that again... really, really... very sorry."

Nagase repented despondently.

"But that was your way of trying to advance forward, wasn't it? So, thank you. And now it's my turn."

Until now, I had not confronted 'that'.

Until now, I had not thought about 'that'.

So 'that' definitely didn't advance forward.

What was I afraid about? What was I confused of? Was it because I was in this situation for the first time? Was it really because of this?

But everyone would be like that? — to be afraid of things they do not know; to be at their wit's end because of it.

If it were something bright, the brighter it was, the scarier and harder to handle it would become.

But if we stay timid and do not do anything, we could never get 'that'.

Even we may not succeed in moving forward, it still holds as a truth.

Maybe we would end up with a tragedy and lose 'that' which we longed for.

Maybe we would get hurt.

But, even though in order to get 'that' we would expose ourselves to many risks, 'it' had infinite possibilities.

Why did not I notice this?

Accept it, confront it, think about it, and advance forward!

"Recently... there have been a lot of things... a lot of things."

Things with Aoki, Kiriyama, Inaba, and finally Nagase—Taichi looked back at those things. When he had accepted it, confronted it, and thought about it, he

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would discover what he had earned had become his force to advance forward.

"Also, I understood and learnt a lot... After that, I noticed... to speak the truth, I seem to be—"

The gem-like eyes clearly reflected Taichi.

"I seem to be a dull character with no expression!"

"I know."

...Taichi originally thought this was an impactful truth.

"Eh~So... I extremely long to be like you."

"Long? Long to be someone... like me?"

"That's right. I always think that if I can be like you and have an assortment of expressions like being happy, angry, delighted, sorrowful, and sometimes joyful, sometimes sombre, sometimes serious and sometimes comedic... If I were to list out examples I would never stop... but I think it would be great if I could be like you."

That was right; Taichi longed to have different spectacular expressions and a jovial life like Nagase.

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"T-That is... only because I... played so many characters... It isn't something to long for. I'm a person... who lost the real 'me'... a faulty person."

The dark side that Nagase showed.

But, to Taichi now, this was the existence for an answer.

Does it really matter? Tacihi questioned himself. Maybe his prediction was right, or maybe it was wrong—there was some kind of risk. If he really fails again, the possibility of returning to their original relationship would be certainly low.

But, if there was a possibility that he could save Nagase, he would advance forward for it.

"Is it really what you say it is?"

He said.

At first, Nagase widened her jaws in surprise, and showed an expression that she did not understand what Taichi meant; but her expression gradually become stern and icy.

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"What does that mean? What do you want to say?  
Have you misunderstood something?"

Nagase said in a reproachful tone with a poker face that made Taichi backed a little.

Nevertheless, even if this was it—

"You would joke; you would become silly; you would get embarrassed; you would tell dirty jokes; you would recklessly do things or make others do them; you will do anything that comes to your heart; you are a person who proposes good ideas and is sensitive to small details; you sometimes don't really think but sometimes you think too much; you are sometimes optimistic and sometimes pessimistic; and when you talk about serious matters you would become sorry and intentionally pretend to become foolish; sometimes you would seriously discuss about stupid topics; you would sometimes show your sombre side and sometimes your bright side; you would occasionally have a cold expression; you would sometimes be childish while sometimes mature; you are sometimes gentle, like to pull pranks and when you look like you don't really care about people you actually are quite considerate—"

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"...Eh? What are you saying...?"

"I'm describing the person, 'Nagase Iori'."

Nagase's body tensed as if shocked, and then she locked her lips tightly as if clenching her teeth.

"Look? Who is the real 'me'?... No, none of them is the real 'me'—"

"Every one of them is you."

"...What... are you saying..."

"All of them... Each and every one of them... is Nagase Iori—"

Maybe that was actually what it was.

"No, wait... How can there be someone like that?  
Someone who have that much faces—"

"This is normal, right? Humans originally have a lot of faces. The problem is how many. I'm a person who has less and you have more—it's that simple."

"But... I did this to pander to others..."

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"Anyone would change their behavior depending on the atmosphere. You are just a bit exaggerated in this regard... Didn't you say you couldn't freely change your face recently?"

"That was... but I surely... must prepare what attitude I will use to face others to get along with them..."

"There wouldn't be a person who can completely get along with others without any preparation while acting the same way all the time, right?"

"B-But even the things I like will change... depending on the situation..."

"This just means that you like a lot of things, and you can change what you like more depending on the situation, right?"

"B-But I... can't even decide which club to enter on my own..."

"Isn't that the same as those who randomly choose clubs which are more relaxing or those who enter clubs because of their friends?"

"...Are you just trying to contradict everything I say?"

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"Actually, that's exactly what I'm doing."

"What, you said it yourself?"—Nagase said and guffawed. Tachi also followed her and laughed, so Nagase followed him and laughed and Taichi then followed her and laughed again. Their laughter called upon each other and became a vortex of laughter.

Simply feeling pleasurable; only pleasurable. A pleasure that felt as if all the 'happiness' around the world has converged here.

The two laughed for a long period of time. Nagase then said while gasping,

"Ahhaha, ha... I'm tired... Actually, I also long to be like you. Wherever the place, whenever the time, whatever happens... to not waver and to hold on to my real self no matter who you're facing; Taichi is Taichi. You stayed as Taichi all along; even if I use different 'me's to face you, you still kept the same attitude. So you can make me feel assured... I really long to have an definite self, and to be able to assure others.

Ahah—Taichi moaned in his heart; he was very similar to Nagase—except just completely the opposite.

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Taichi has slightly less emotions than most people; Nagase has slightly more and exaggerated emotions than most people... But after all, it was only slightly so it was not a big problem even if they kept their original form. In fact, Taichi did not really care about that. It was Nagase who had experienced trauma which caused her to exaggeratedly mistake her personality as a serious condition... Was this what happened?

If compared to the typical agonies that protagonists have, like complete emotional failure or acute emotional breakdown, this was an extremely small problem. However, people still tend to agonize and worry about such small problems. These small problems—as seen to them—were so big that they could crush a person. If we put all those small agonies together, the amount must be lot more than those huge and insurmountable agonies. There is not some special meaning to this—it only means that the world in which we live in is like that.

In such a world, we, being entangled by small problems, should do something to live—

That something was not to self-sacrifice—at least Taichi could be certain for now. This seemed to be done for Nagase, but it was also done for himself.

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So, let us pursue 'that'.

"I like Nagase Iori, so I wish you would go out with me."

Both of us lack in something the other had. If we could join hands and march forward together, many small agonies could be cleared. So, let us live together.

Nagase's mouth opened and closed in surprise. She looked speechless. Even in the sunset, her reddening face was clear.

Then she continued to blink her eyes; after a while of blinking, she shrunk her body and drooped her head.

And then when she raised her head—

But—

The expression on her face was—

—'nothingness'.

Her originally reddening cheeks had suddenly become wan.

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That was a face like a Noh mask [8]."

Her eyes were sombre and hazy.

She lost her vitality.

She looked like the [Gotou Ryuusen] he had seen before.

And then 'that guy' commenced.

"Hello... Long time now see... and sorry. Ahah...  
Looking at your face, I think you most likely will know...  
I'm «Fuusenkazura»."

—Until just then Taichi forgot about something.

It was that the world of Taichi and the others was now under the control of «Fuusenkazura».

It was not strange for anything to happen—no matter how surreal it was.

«Fuusenkazura» can possess [Gotou].

Then of course he could also possess [Nagase].

"Ahah... Let me first apologise to you—sorry... also, help me to apologise to Nagase-san later... this is true... from my heart I say... Mmm, maybe I'm only sorry in the intermediate level... Ahah... let me correct it back to from my heart... but this the wrong of you guys? This is because you guys are too interesting..."

«Fuusenkazura», who now had [Nagase's appearance], threw his cell phone and wallet towards Taichi. Then he stood on the fence near the river at a surprising speed and faced towards the road Taichi was on.

A strong wind blew and his uniform danced with it.

Betung!

Taichi's heart pounced as if it were about to jump out.

Has he ever experienced such immediate and ominous feelings in his life before?

At that moment, Taichi carelessly saw it.

He saw [Nagase], which had been glowing and full of glimmer, exude a sombre aura (as if a black shadow had taken over her) that was the exact opposite of 'life'.

"Hey... What are you..."

His throat suddenly became so dry he could not say a word. Taichi slowly approached «Fuusenkazura» so as to prevent stimulating him.

But, «Fuusenkazura» seemed not to be aware of Taichi and concluded without much sincerity.

"—So as I said, I'm sorry—"

[Nagase's body] fell from her narrow and unsteady stance.

After that—

[Nagase] — «Fuusenkazura» fell head-down into the distant water surface.

"Hey, is this for real!"

Just when Taichi hurried to the fence, his vision suddenly turned to complete black.

When his vision returned to normal, his buttocks felt hard. What he saw was a familiar clubroom scene.

And in front of him were Inaba and Aoki.



The members of the Cultural Research Club had now gathered in a corner of the second floor of the general hospital in the city. That corner was a lounge with only a long bench and a vending machine. All the members were there—except Nagase.

Nagase was now in the Intensive Care Unit.

Everyone's expression was pale, including Taichi's, who had thought of this in his abnormally clear and calm mind.

"Damnit!... Nagase is almost dying already, but why can't we do anything...!"

Aoki's nasal words seemed to be said in extreme pain while he potently beat his thighs.

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"Don't blame it on yourself, Aoki. We can't really do anything."

Inaba convinced him quietly. Her inexplicable voice was coarse yet comforting.

"Sorry... everyone... If I were... to cheer up a bit... when I became [Taichi]... I should have jumped down to save her... but I heard that the rescuer might also drown... so the correct way was to find help or find something that could float... so I..."

Kiriyama started sobbing.

Inaba, at her side, embraced Kiriyama, who seemed so weak she could collapse at any minute, tightly. She let Kiriyama put her face into her chest while she fondled her chestnut hair.

"Yui, you have done nothing wrong—I must applaud you to be so calm even in such a situation! If you hadn't done it correctly, maybe it would've turned out to be even more tragic... you have done well."

The last phrase made Kiriyama even more agitated that she sobbed even harder, as if trying to say that the

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only thing she wanted is to cry out loud. Inaba on the other hand bore her frantic emotions.

"Indeed... it's me—Ouch!"

Just when Taichi wanted to speak, Inaba kicked his calf fiercely.

Her eyes moist with tears, Taichi looked at Inaba and saw her expression twisting in pain.

Inaba leant her mouth close to Taichi's ear and squeezed her voice,

"Please, don't apologise as well... please... hold it. I have no way to continue to bear this; even I'm also becoming a bit depressed... so I hope you can at least be a little stronger... Please..."

Falling down, getting saved, being sent to the hospital and forced to hear from the nurse that 'the situation is extremely critical'. How could I grudgingly bear such overflowing pressure? Taichi knew the reason—because Inaba bore part of these twisted emotions.

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Taichi firmly looked into Inaba's eyes and nodded. Everyone has their limits, and Inaba was not an exception.

Inaba also nodded and her tensed expressions loosened up a bit.

Nobody has done anything wrong here. Everyone knows that it was 'that guy' who did this. Despite of this, we still couldn't help but to reproach ourselves because we want to veil our helplessness.

Only the four club members were in the lounge. Nagase's mum didn't seem to be at home so she was not contacted. Gotou seemed to be rushing from school.

Tachi lifted his head and gazed at the ceiling. The dim ceiling spread across his vision. One of the two fluorescent lights on top had burnt out and had only a weak glow.

—Gok, gok.

Footsteps sounded from afar. They grew louder every step as they gradually approached the lounge.

A weird quietness covered the lounge. Of course, they would not know who was coming just by hearing those footsteps; but everyone thought "maybe 'that guy' has come" and held their breath while waiting.

And then 'that guy' showed up in the lounge.

They could know just by looking at his face. After all, normal humans could not have an expression that seems to have lost all its vitality.

This was the second time they have met «Fuusenkazura» in [Gotou Ryuusen's] body.

"Hi, nice to meet you... Ahaha... everyone has such dangerous eyes... please don't do anything troublesome... I ask for your cooperation deep down in my heart."

As if having no consciousness that he was responsible for it, «Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] talked with a plain tone.

He even showed an attitude that he was uninterested to the 'appalling situation'; that made the club members even more confused.

Should I be angry? Or should I be afraid? Should I reproach him? Should we let him to explain our situation

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? Should I panic? Should I antagonize him? Should I escape? Should I punch him? Should I feel scared? Should I complain? —What choice should I make?

Every time I fail to see any emotions on «Fuusenkazura», I would be lost as to what attitude to confront him with; this would make my perplexed feelings seem to be even more perplexed.

"What are you here for? What do you want to do?"

When others could not make up their mind on what to do, Inaba had already quietly showed her anger; the feeling of tranquillity she gave foreshadowed ferocious eruptions.

"...To inquire for the reasons immediately sure helps me, Inaba-san... Ahaha. So did Yaegashi-kun help me describe what I did? Ahaha... It's rare that I could enter the main topic but then I drift off... again... forget it. Eh... In about thirty minutes—

"—[Nagase Iori's body] will die."

He looked as if saying something that was not important.

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There should be a limit about what you joke, Taichi thought.

"...What the hell are you saying! Are you saying that you can control the life and death of a person?"

Of course, Inaba roared.

"No, no, Inaba-san... How can I do such things... I'm only «Fuusenkazura» that isn't worth mentioning... At least I know what is true... that is—[Nagase-san's body] will die; does everyone understand?"

"How will... Who do you think will believe in you!"

Kiriyama's voice was about to cry, but she still said gallantly.

Right, we could not trust him.

"Although it depends on whether you believe in me or not... I still hope you can believe in me... I came here specially for it, so if I don't get my pay, I can't really become energetic... Ahah, I don't really have any energy from the start... nevertheless, to be honest, I have a little energy now... because you are very interesting... Ahah, I just said something harmful again... when there is

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something more important to say. Eh, so is everyone prepared...? Inaba-san... can you help me remember what I'm going to say? I don't have the energy or the patience to say it again a few times."

After a slight pause, «Fuusenkazura» plainly spoke with no intonation.

"Your personalities are now freely moving among [your bodies]... Undoubtedly, every [body] will contain a personality... this means that if a [body] dies, a personality will be destroyed with it. But... this is very important — the personality that dies does not have to die with the same [body]... Mmm... In fact, even if the personality is different from the [body] that contains it, that person can still live successfully... so I have a suggestion — may all of you please choose the personality to die with the [body of Nagase]? I'm also giving you an extra service... which is, from now on, for thirty minutes, I will let you exchange with the person you want to once you tell me... so this is all I have to say.. ."

What is he saying?

"... By the way, Umm... doesn't that mean you can deliberately control the personality exchange...? So it actually was not... random...?"

Aoki murmured in extreme surprise.

"Ayahayah, able to exchange personalities randomly but unable to appoint who exchanges... do you think that is possible in common sense? Ahah... But until now the 'personality exchange' was random... because if I didn't set it that way, it would be troublesome..."

Inaba vehemently stood up, rushed into «Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] who looked sluggish and was saying self-loathing things.

"Stop joking!"

Inaba cried and attacked «Fuusenkazura».

"Ahah... such energy..."

The instant «Fuusenkazura» murmured, Inaba stopped her attack. She stopped and looked around confused.

"Eh...? A personality exchange... mmm?"

Looking at her surprised look and the way she spoke — Taichi suspected that Nagase had exchanged with Inaba. Was Nagase's soul inside [Inaba's body] that was in front of him?

Nagase [Inaba] walked away from [Gotou] step by step and headed towards Taichi and the other club members.

"Eh, Why is... Taichi here? Right now, we should be... at the bridge."

Being possessed by «Fuusenkazura» and then falling into a coma, Nagase's memory was left at the bridge when she met with Taichi.

No matter how you put it, «Fuusenkazura» has gone too far — who does he think we are?

A sudden anger rushed to Taichi's chest. He followed his anger, approached «Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] and stretched his hand.

"Stop your — eh?"

Taichi's body floated weightlessly in mid-air.

Then his whole body immediately fell upside down. For an instant Taichi saw the sombre and dark eyes of « Fuusenkazura ». The next instant, his back experienced a strong impulse.

"Wuah!"

When he regained his consciousness, the pain of his back left him; gazing at the ceiling, he was only depressed in his inability to stop the chaos that « Fuusenkazura », a resident from an aberrant world, had made.

Insignificant, he was unable to retaliate the powerful enemy.

Neither was he able to protect the one he said he liked.

"Ayah, as I was saying... these aren't the things you should be doing... So... time's up for my talk here. I'll be back later. Please make your decision before I come back.  
"

No one could stop him from leaving.

Everyone could only stare him off.

"Tai-Taichi! Are you all right? Why was Go here?"

Nagase [Inaba] dashed to Taichi side and stretched her hand to lift him up.

Taichi could not look straight at her confused and anxious look.

Taichi did not want to believe what happened, so he tried to murmur, "Please let Nagase exchange with Inaba. " Though «Fuusenkazura» said the exchange was set manual, things like these should be impossible in common sense... but—

"... Why am I holding hands with Taichi? And where did that asshole «Fuusenkazura» go?"

Inaba's personality had returned back to [Inaba's body] whereas Nagase's personality had returned to [Nagase's body] inside the Intensive Care Unit.

We could only accept this then.

Taichi, Inaba, Kiriyama and Aoki temporarily confirmed their status now.

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"In other words, it's 'letting us to choose who to kill'... right? What was that guy thinking...! What the... heck...!"

Inaba complained with a voice filled with hate.

"But Iori wouldn't die so easily... because the doctor... is working hard... to save her...!"

Kiriyama said her wish desperately.

"Yeah... maybe that asshole «Fuusenkazura» was speaking nonsense all the way... But, maybe he wasn't. We must confront it since there's a possibility — no matter how cruel it sounds. If it was as he said, things will go beyond our control and there will be no turning back, so we must obey him... though I'm pissed off at this fact."

As Inaba had said — we could not escape even if we really wanted to.

Because there was no way to tell whether what «Fuusenkazura» said was true or false.

"... Bullshit~ ~! How can it end like this with me here!"

Inaba fiercely punched on the bench that was only covered by a thin piece of leather.

"Looks like someone is going to die... or sacrifice themselves... right?"

Aoki covered his head and murmured.

Assume what «Fuusen kazura» said was true.

Then [Nagase's body] would die. At the same time, there would be a personality among the five — or a soul — that would die.

No one wants to die.

So this will become a debate of 'who to sacrifice' as Aoki said.

Death.

This was the ultimate death that was completely unimaginable.

To let someone else bear the pain — I would not let that happen!

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So...

"If someone has to be sacrificed, let it be me."

—I want to sacrifice myself.

—So, let me be sacrificed.

"Yui... Please punch his head with the intention to kill him." Inaba said.

"Understood, I will do it with all my power." Kiriyama replied.

"Eh, it isn't that good for Yui to use all her power..."

While Aoki was in the middle of his sentence — Kiriyama had come in front of Taichi.

The blood vessels of her eyes expanded; her expression turned scary; her chestnut long hair had become tousled... Kiriyama shivered like a tiger in anger.

I almost did not see her fist.

When I regained my consciousness, the crackling sounds of bones reverberated in my brain; my head felt

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as if being sent flying away — so did my body. I awkwardly rolled on the floor, which caused an unbelievable pain in my cheeks.

I put my hand on my left cheek and moaned.

"What stupid words you say... Stop joking!"

Inaba kneeled down, pulled me up, and I was still moaning too, and violently gripped my collar.

"What is wrong with you?! What is 'let me be sacrificed'? Have you ever considered... considered the feelings of those who are left behind because of your sacrifice? You look like you're thinking for others, but you're just thinking of yourself — a true self-centred bastard!"

Inaba roared at me at an extremely close distance as though we were stuck to each other.

Kiriyama had punched me directly with a fist that contained her true feelings from her heart; Inaba's words were the same. They both touched me.

Then something in my heart collapsed.

"... Yeah... Is that wrong?! I... I just don't want to see anyone getting hurt in front of me! When someone gets hurt or feels pain or disgusted I can't stop myself from imagining the pain they're suffering... Then my imagination would expand and become an incurable pain — I can't stand it! I hate it this way... so, it's better if I can bear it myself, because I know the limit of the pain... and I could bear it... You're right, I'm not doing it for anyone... I'm 'sacrificing myself' only for myself!"

The vague message once in my brain was now clearly spoken... I was finally able to say it out!

My left cheek became burningly hot, but there was something that moistened it warmly.

I was crying.

In my blurry vision, Inaba showed a shocked expression, but she quickly changed to an expression filled with benevolence and let go of her hand that was gripping on my collar.

"So you thought this way, Taichi. You are such a strange person. Though strange, you have a crazy way of kindness! Feeling the pains of others as though they were your own and saying 'it will be easier for you to bear the

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pain'... You are such a... gentle and awkward fool. But if you could suffer for other's pain, can't you understand that when you're hurt the people around you also get hurt? Even if it's fine for you to get hurt, it will be painful for us... and especially to those who think you're more than just friends to them."

"Though you're quite silly to say it now, to listen to the words from your heart are wonderful"—Inaba said. Then she clumsily wiped off my tears.

"Sorry, Taichi!"

Kiriyama, at my side, fell on the floor crying.

"Sorry, you're in pain. Sorry, you're in pain. Sorry, you're in pain..." She continuously repeated that.

"It doesn't matter... Kiriyama, didn't you want me to wake up? Besides... your hands and your heart also hurts... I should be one to say sorry... Thank you."

"There's only one thing... I hope you can understand... If you... die, then we'll suffer from a pain that would be tens and hundreds of what we suffered just now...! So... So please don't say that!"

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"You don't need to say this now as he had understood.." Inaba murmured beside Kiriyama.

Taichi deeply felt the gentleness of everyone; and at the same time he understood how selfish he was before. In theory his actions are plainly helping others, but sometimes his actions aren't.

If there were not the 'personality exchange', maybe I would have never faced this side of myself.

I knew a bit more of myself.

And I knew a lot more of the people around.

By accepting, thinking, and advancing, I could gain a lot of things from now on.

Though there might be a lot of painful things, there will still be an innumerable amount of joyful things—this kind of my life is waiting for me.

—But surely someone must leave from that kind of a future.

That was desperation that could not be described completely by cruelty, dismalness, and desolation.

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"So...what should we do...!"

I had no way but to moan.

At this time, Aoki spoke.

"I think the only one to die with [Iori's body] is herself..  
."

Time, something that should be flowing steadily,  
seemed to stop.

I did not want to think of anything; I was unable to.

"W-What are you saying! Please... Pleaseee don't say  
that Iori should die!"

Kiriyama agitatedly gasped like a wild beast.

"...I... I don't want to say this...! I just thought that  
someone needs to say it..."

At last, Aoki added with a weak voice that was almost  
inaudible, "...We can't just let Inaba play the bad person."

"Tsk, you guys are... too gentle..."

Inaba said with a wavering voice.

This fact was a tacit mutual understanding among them.

If they let Nagase live, this will mean that she would live in [someone else's body]. There was no way to justify that Nagase should use [someone else's body] and live as [another person].

But even so—

My thinking went into an infinite loop.

There was no progress in my thinking.

"It isn't right to make a decision when Nagase's absent.  
.. I think we have to let her know... what do you think...?"

"You're right... there's no way... I really suck, only being capable of saying 'there's no way' and nothing else.  
...!"

"After all, I said it, so let me do the exchange..." Aoki continued, "Please let me—Aoki Yoshifumi, exchange with Nagase Iori."

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In an instant, Nagase [Aoki] blinked her eyes in surprise and looked at Taichi, who was on the floor amazed. Inaba and Yui and asked them what happened.

"Eh... even I don't really get what situation we've ended up with."

Inaba briefly explained to Nagase [Aoki] what had happened.

"You'll be shocked however we say it... so I decided to make it clear to you now, Iori, you... will maybe die."

Inaba stared straight at Nagase [Aoki] and spoke to her firmly. To be honest, it would be really hard to say it, but it was Inaba's specialty to hide her weak side.

Nagase [Aoki] should have understood from Inaba's attitude that she was absolutely not joking around, because the look on her face obviously tensed up and her eyes were scared like a puppy's. She hesitated as if her heart had skipped a beat.

Her eyes moved and stopped when directed at mine.

For a moment, though only a bit, Nagase's [Aoki's] expression eased up.

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Maybe I could give something to Nagase to alleviate her deep distress. For this reason, I stared straight back at her.

I felt remorse for being unable to do anything else for her.

She then took her eyes off me and looked at Kiriyama.

A big teardrop coursed down Kiriyama's face, but she forcefully bit her lips in order not to cry out or whimper.

Nagase [Aoki] then turned her eyes back to me, closed her eyes, and locked her lips into a straight line.

After a few seconds of silence, she opened her eyes.

"Fine, please continue."

She said with a respectable, brave and masculine expression.

In my memory, I had never seen anybody with such consciousness.

Then Nagase [Aoki] kept silent during Inaba's explanation. She would sometimes nod in response.

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Inaba's explanation ended soon after that.

In spite of this, Nagase [Aoki] still kept silent.

What was she thinking in her heart? I could not imagine.

So, how much time does she need? Everyone might have been thinking this. In the next instant, however,

she smiled.

Then she said,

"If that's the case, then let me die."

That was a bright weightless sound.

"Ah... Am I really going to die?... Hehe, I know I'm going to die, but I still could speak to everyone so casually—this feels miraculous."

"Maybe... not..."

Kiriyama tried to deny it with an extremely weak voice.

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"Mmm, maybe you're right... but I would still act as if 'I would'; after all, I don't want to regret anything."

Even in these extreme conditions, her tone was the same. Tears quickly welled in my eyes.

"Nagase... but maybe you wouldn't..."

"That is not the way to take it, nor is it possible."

Nagase's blunt and direct smile pierced through my heart. Her appearance was undoubtedly [Aoki's], but her smile obviously belonged to Nagase.

"Everything including my appearance is a part of 'me'! My personality or my appearance isn't me—the sum of them is. Besides, I'm proud that I'm 'myself'... I had almost lost myself, but someone reminded me of this."

Nagase looked at everyone's face and held everyone in suspense. Her face looked certain of success and about to play her trump card.

"Besides, to kill one's personality and live in his [body] is a sin too heavy for me to bear."

No one could refute her.

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Then Nagase [Aoki] wish everyone could listen to her last wish.

"Can I... have a talk with every one of you independently?"

So the club members followed Nagase's wish and let her talk with each of them in the lounge of the hospital for the last moments of her life.

The last moments of her life.

No one wanted to admit it, and some may even want to oppose it, but as every minute and second pass away, everyone was incapable of doing anything.

«Fuusenkazura» said he would be back in thirty minutes so there wasn't much time now.

At the beginning, Nagase was sent to [Kiriyama's body] to meet with Aoki who was returned to [Aoki's body]; after that, she continued to use [Kiriyama's body] to meet with Inaba. When Aoki passed by Inaba, there were tears on his face.

And now Nagase was using [Inaba's body] to meet with Kiriyama.

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I sat with Aoki on the long bench in the corridor that was a bit far from the lounge; but we didn't talk. I looked at the door of the Intensive Care Unit. [Nagase Iori's body] was in that room and the personality that was inside that body belong to Inaba. Of course, Nagase's body was not conscious so Inaba should now be in vast darkness with no consciousness or feeling.

I could hear sounds of someone sobbing and walking along the corridor.

"Tai-Taichi... Iori is calling you..."

Kiriyama choked with sobs.

I nodded my head without saying a word. Then I went through the corridor and entered the lounge.

Her medium-long glossy black hair, her slender and small limbs, and a tender and sweet atmosphere that would not be emanated from her usually...

In front of me, there was a being with [Inaba's] appearance but without Inaba's existence.

The kind of atmosphere that allowed the sending of messages without words confirmed Nagase's existance.

"Hi, Taichi."

Nagase [Inaba] greeted me like any other morning.

"Yo, Nagase."

I replied her with the same attitude.

My heart was incredibly calm. Rather than sinking into grief, I decided to, with all my might, feel this instant now.

"Isn't it strange that only Taichi is acting like usual...? Everyone else had an expression like they were participating in my funeral."

"...Do you want me to have that expression?"

"No, No, Please don't. Please don't! If you do, it would be hard to chat and cause a headache! Also, the time for our last meeting is ticking away... In short, Taichi, thank you, because I didn't have the chance to thank you there at the bridge. After hearing your words, I think my

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agonies... though I can't say they were completely gone... I feel a lot more comfortable now, and it occurred to me that I can include a lot of things in 'myself' and like that kind of 'me'."

Nagase finally accepted herself—this seemed to be a correct statement. To advance further one will maybe pay more time, but starting from 'that' is fine; after all, the starting point is 'accepting oneself'.

Though there was no time for that now.

"Also, you also said... you liked me, and you confessed to me, right?... I didn't answer you then, so now I will."

Nagase [Inaba] showed a nervous yet a determined and serious expression.

I also used a frank expression to await the words that Nagase was going to weave.

"—But before that, you are still anticipating for me to tell a joke, right?!"

"I'm not anticipating, but I've guessed you would tell a joke!"

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Even in this circumstances she was still funny... There should be a limit to the adamancy of her playfulness.

"He, he, he"—Nagase [Inaba] smiled with an expression that was all in her plan—but that stopped now.

Nagase's [Inaba's] expression suddenly twitched.

"~ ~What... What's the matter... How can you stay so casual even at a time like this... Everyone else, on the other hand, looks very sad..."

Of course I was sad and I want badly to cry, but if I really cry—

"Of course I'm sad. I'm so sad I want to die... But, aren't you sadder than me?

"—So Nagase could not cry?"

The question I asked finally made Nagase burst into tears; her tears affluently flowed out.

It was certain that she would cry; it would be strange if she did not all this time.

After all, she was about to die.

She must be so sad she wanted to cry in desperation, scream, or moan; but she didn't.

Maybe it was her way of gentleness by not making everyone even sadder, for I would do the same if I were her.

But that did not matter now.

I walked towards her and hugged her.

It was extremely soft.

Warm.

And sorrowful.

Though that [body] belonged to Inaba.

"Ah~... I don't want to die yet... I want to live a bit longer... My life just started now! Why... Why... must I... go through such things... What wrong... have I done? ..."

Nagase desperately cried deep down in her heart to this obvious fact. Her tears overflowed out of her control.

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I bore her tears.

I did not shed a single tear myself.

Would I be criticised as a "fool that loves to sacrifice himself"?

No, I would not. What I did was not for myself, but to care for her and help her; so I should not be criticised. I was unable to clearly make a differentiation, but I feel that I slightly started to understand something.

"...You also confessed... and said you like me..."

A warm feeling rushed to my chest; I resisted it the moment before it became a teardrop; and at the same time I let my hate to «Fuusenkazura» sink to the bottom of my heart. In this most precious and sacred time in my life, I do not want to think of those things.

After a while, Nagase [Inaba] parted from me while wiping her tears.

"After all, it's my last time... I must... say this clearly."

Nagase [Inaba] inhaled and exhaled as if preparing. She smiled with her red and swollen eyes.

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I could see a future in that smile.

It was a bright and glimmering future.

Even in this situation,

that smile was enough to be called a miracle.

"I also like Yaegashi Taichi, so please... don't go out with me."

"It's my pleas... what?"

What was going on?

"Fufufu, aren't I going to die now? You can't go out with such a person, or else you'll get a headache, right?"



"Are you still minding that?"

She blocked my screaming mouth with her left hand.

She was so gentle my breast was about to tear apart.

"On the contrary, please give me a memory... so, let's kiss?"

"If it was only a kiss, Inaban would probably forgive me"—Nagase [Inaba] murmured lowly.



"Eh... I have to ask now... who do you choose?"

Who will die?

«Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] tiredly asked a question which was so deep that it went way beyond normal

reasoning. In front of «Fuusenkazura» were Nagase [Inaba], Taichi, Kiriyama, and Aoki who all sat on the long bench silently.

"It's me... I, Nagase Iori, will die with [Nagase Iori's body], altogether."

Without any hesitation, Nagase [Inaba] stood up and said. Her incredible behaviour made Taichi and the others completely speechless and numb.

"Mmm... That is the best conclusion... Ahah... So there wasn't any miraculous change?"

"But can I ask you one more thing before I die?"

Nagase [Inaba] stared straight at the person who had caused her death and asked him.

She had an expression made only for this situation.

"So, what actually was this...?"

Spending about a month's time letting Taichi and the other 4 people exchanging personalities randomly and making someone die at the end—what actually was this?

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"...What is this... long words short... please don't care about this now and also in the future..."

«Fuusenkazura» was annoyed by Nagase's sincere question and skimped it.

"How can anyone accept that answer—Mm?"

Nagase [Inaba] stopped Kiriyma who was trying to stand up and debate.

"Is it? ... Indeed, you do not plan to answer me directly ... then forget it, but there's one thing I could never yield nor allow; let me ask you—"

She spoke with an expression that left others gasping in awe of her beauty and determination.

"—You won't ever do this to anyone else, right?"

This was matter that she absolutely wanted to confirm.

This indeed was something that must be considered. From now on, will Taichi and the others experience this ridiculous situation again? This question is a matter of life and death.

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But was that something that Nagase needed to care about?

Was that what she could care about?

She was a person about to face death...

Upon hearing her words, «Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] temporarily became static; there were no changes in his expression, but in what Taichi saw he seemed a bit shocked.

"...Of course."

His tone was a bit honest.

"—Ahah, has the time come yet?"

«Fuusenkazura» suddenly said.

He did not even give any time for anyone to prepare himself or herself.

[Inaba's body] instantaneously stiffened, and then [Inaba] lightly shook her head.

"What the—"

[Inaba] who was about to speak caught in her vision «Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] who was right in front of her.

"You...! No, more importantly, Iori—"

«Fuusenkazura» did not show any special response to her words, because Taichi knew he had terminated the 'personality exchange'.

At the same time when Inaba screamed, the door of the Intensive Care Unit opened.

At this moment—

What «Fuusenkazura» said was—

Everyone held their breath and gazed at the opening door.

Everyone prayed that it would not happen

Please do not end now.

Please do not let it end.

Please let us dream a little more that Nagase would not die yet.

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But the time passed mercilessly.

Not long, the doctor that approached them said—

"Congratulations. She is out of the woods now. She'll be all right."



The doctor told Taichi and the others, startled, that they were really lucky this time. They did not have to worry about any side effects and she would later be transferred to other medical wards and they could meet then.

The doctor was a bit surprised why they did not have much response, but he seemed to have explained it as "because they overdone their relaxation". So the doctor left a word—"In short, it's too good to be true"—and left them.

When everyone was stunned, Inaba managed to grudgingly speak,

"Hey... you... what is this...?"

"Yes, yes... thanks everyone..."

«Fuusenkazura» [Gotou] said as if nothing had happened.

"Ahah... and please accept this cake as your compensation... Ahah... It would be even better if you could also take this to Nagase-san as her gift when you visit her... to me mainly that is."

«Fuusenkazura» lightly lifted his head which was holding a paper bag.

Inaba backed to the wall and banged her head 'bong' on the wall.

"I'm tricked... though this is possible... and I've actually suspected it... but... Ah ~ ~ ~ By the way... Ah ~ ~ ~ What is this actually?!"

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"Eh... Then... Iori... is fine... She is still... living!  
Wu-Wuah~ ~"

Kiriyama clenched her teeth and murmured word by word. She then covered her face and started crying.

"...Is that so? I-It's so great... Wuah... I feel so worn out.  
.."

Aoki let his body sled down slowly and finally sat on the floor.

As for Taichi... his brain was still malfunctioning because he was wondering what to do with what he did with Nagase... Or he might as well think over how he should get along with her from now on... Mmm, maybe he should just get along with her as usual.

"In short, I'm sorry... Inaba."

Taichi apologised to Inaba for the time being and prayed that was not Inaba's first kiss.

"...Hey, about this... from where it started and where it ended—is this all part of your plan?"

Inaba asked «Fuusenkazura» as if suddenly losing all her power.

"Mmm... If I were to say, everything, from head to toe was part of my plan... what happened was similar to what I've expected... because what I can do is far from what you guys can imagine... After all, we could exchange personalities between people; can you understand if I put it this way? ... Ahah... This has nothing to do with you guys..."

"...So you are saying you originally didn't plan to do anything with Nagase?"

Speaking of which, when «Fuusenkazura» possessed [Nagase], he specially took out her cell phone and wallet before jumping into the river—Taichi started to remember as he listened to «Fuusenkazura».

"...Of course not, how could I trouble a kind citizen like that... although it caused enough troubles in her daily life... But I hope this cake makes up for that... I didn't bake it though... Ayah? 'Bake' and 'cake' rhymes... ahah, that really has nothing to do with this...So, I don't

plan to say anything like hoping you guys to forgive me, but I do hope that you won't hate me. In fact... you guys.. . have experienced some good things, haven't you?"

His last sentence seemed to contain the first feeling « Fuusenkazura» has for Taichi and the others, though this was so thin it might be a misperception.

"So... I have to leave now and go back. Ahah... You guys look like you seem to understand, but please don't penalise [this person]... because it would be bad if there were to be an aftermath; on top of that, or should I say, if you could, please don't think too much about my things or just simply forget about me... Or maybe you possibly can't? Ahah... I've said too much after 'so'... So, see you later."

Having finished talking, [Gotou's] head drooped like how Taichi and the others experienced a 'personality exchange'—then he immediately wakened; he lifted his head and opened his eyes.

The 'drama' arrived like a sudden storm and shocked them with unbelievable power, but the curtain call of it was yet plain and calm.

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"...Mmm? This is...? I remember I rushed it with a rental car because I heared Nagase fell into the river and was sent to hospital... strange? This is the hospital. Oh, everyone of the Cultural Research Club except Nagase is already here, it's shocking—so I used all my might to get here that I even lost my consciousness on my way... gosh, I really want to praise myself from my yet unleashed power when I do things for my students... and what's this paper bag doing here on my right hand...? Ohoh... it's strawberry rice balls...! Mmm? But why would it be here...? Forget it, I like strawberries anyway...Right, about Nagase's condition—Ooouch Ouch Ouch Ouch! It hurts! It really hurts, Inaba-san!"

Inaba cobra-twisted Gotou.

"Shut up! I have to let this stupid and strange head of yours remember firmly that 'if you don't think deeply, you'll have a dismal ending'!"

As she said that, she changed her cobra twist into a questioning cobra twist (which is to use the cobra twist incisively while pressing the opponent's head downwards with a hand). She was extra incisive.

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## Epilogue

—Then, after a week.

That guy had lied before and his existence was so vague that in the end we still didn't know who he was, but what he said about there being no aftermath was true. Nagase did not experience any side effects and went back to school immediately. A letter was directly thrown into her mailbox at home. The money for her medical fees was inside it—«Fuusenkazura» sure took detailed care of remedial measures. (Although Gotou mentioned in a class meeting a few days later, "I obviously remembered that I didn't withdraw money, but when I looked at my bank savings some of my money was gone.. . What do you think? Does this mean I fell victim to some kind of fraud? Should I call the police?" But the Cultural Research Club decided to completely neglect what he said)

"At least «Fuusenkazura» didn't have malicious intent towards us. Or maybe he is not a bad guy"—Taichi thought and honestly said. But Inaba scolded him, "Your optimism is so embarrassing!"

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In the end, they finally escaped from the turbulence that has been affecting their lives since Nagase entered the hospital. And today was the start of a new week of club activities that the Cultural Research Club missed so badly. Activities, however, were not amazing or terrific things.

After school, Taichi was on duty to clean the classroom. After he finished, he packed up his things and headed to the fourth floor of the recreational building. The other members should have already gathered there, right?

Hereafter, there were no 'personality exchanges'.

Though strange, when we try to remember what happened, what was stained in our minds during the personality exchange was very little. I don't understand; it was an abnormal phenomenon after all... Or I might as well say that as time passes, even though it did occur, it gradually faded away since it was a bit deviated from reality. It seemed like everything had happened in our dreams.

But some more important things had happened that were more important to me.

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The world of the Cultural Research Club members changed.

The personality exchange was like a storm to us, exposing our agonies one by one. Nevertheless, some agonies that seemed terribly huge, when exposed to the outside, might be discovered to be unexpectedly small and insignificant.

Even every insignificant person could handle such problems.

Of course, you might get hurt, and may not have a guarantee of winning.

But problems that exist in someone insignificant should be smaller and more insignificant, right? This is what I mean.

But to stand up and fight—to confront, accept, and to think about it, certainly is not something that can be done with ease.

It will be too hard to do by yourself.

It will be too hard if there are no opportunities.

But, even if it will be hard, if we can do it—

The worlds of the insignificant five could change, and change to anything they wished.

Problems might still exist, and matters might not be eradicated from the roots.

For example, Taichi, who has a personality to sacrifice himself for others, hadn't changed at all... Of course, this was because this was a personality that existed inside of him, so I guess this would not change.

But, if we confront the problem...

During the phenomenon, the Cultural Research Club members experienced a lot of things among them, and a lot of things had changed. Those things are irreversible.

But should we say that it was fortune or misfortune? At least in what Taichi saw, no one changed for the worse. They managed to do this.

That was because all of them were here and none of them were absent... This was something the five managed to do.

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Compared to the past, Inaba looked gentler.

Compared to her past, Kiriyama looked more active in finding boys to chat with.

Compared to his past, Aoki looked smarter.

As for Nagase... Because she was too embarrassed after the incident, we didn't look at each other in the eyes and chat.

More importantly, Taichi was now extremely anticipating the gatherings with the members in the clubroom. A lot had happened, but only if the five could get together and smile... maybe it would be okay from now on. Taichi couldn't help but think like this.

To think like this was already a treasure; and this treasure represented everything.

Today, would Inaba still get angry at trivial things and resort to violence?

Today, would Kiriyama still become red, shout, and stagger when she is teased by 'your reaction is the most interesting'?

Today, would Aoki be treated undoubtedly as the idiot and play as this role like a professional?

Today, would Nagase wilfully and incessantly act foolishly whether it was planned or not?

So, it was time to seriously undergo our club activities—to make an article that completely shows our interests!

Although Taichi believed it in his heart, at the same time he knew that today wouldn't go too well. Was it because of everyone's glee? He also actually wished that they would frolic a bit more.

Go, what lies ahead of me is the door to the clubroom!

My view was pretty good.

If I were to say something that I was still pondering about, it would be Inaba using an unimaginable cruel smile to say, "I heard from Iori. You... seemed to have stolen my first kiss. How do you think you should compensate for my loss... Fufufufu."

The compensation should not kill me... or so I wished.

(Kokoro Connect 1 Random People The End)

## Author's Notes

Hello everyone. My name is Sadanatsu Anda.

It was fortunate that this novel won the Enterbrain's 11th Entertainment Awards Special Prize, and through it I made my debut.

Many thanks to a lot of people that helped me, who is still insignificant, to grudgingly make it to writing the 'Author's Notes'. My heart is now filled with thanks to each and every one.

The editor once told me, "You are new, but having thanks in the whole script is boring!", so even though I was an ignorant and dull new person, maybe not even a self-proclaimed writer, I want to talk about the sweetness and bitterness when I started writing the novel.

To accomplish something, one must endure a harsh period.

Of course, I write novels because I love to.

Although this is a love different from "I liked reading from a long time ago so I want to write novels!", I aimed to be a novelist, and now I am fortunate to write

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something called the 'Author's Notes', so at least I do not hate to write novels.

Though not perfect, I still had the eagerness and passion to write novels. But if you ask me if I could persevere with the same tension all the time, I will tell you it is surely difficult.

Those who are smart and brilliant could easily excel at and finish writing a novel. But if it is someone like me, who always encounters problems, feels bored, thinks "I can't continue writing~! Writing novels are annoying~!", the motivation to write novels will drop and thus, become agonized.

Nevertheless, if they always complain "I can't continue writing" or "It feels tiresome", a novel would not get done—though this is not limited to writing novels. At these times they must persevere and straddle; or else nothing could be done.

Nevertheless, although I said they must persevere and straddle, I am not one of those people who could successfully manipulate their own emotions—I can't tell myself "Okay, let's do this" to raise my own motivation.

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Therefore, I tried various ways to raise my motivation. There were excellent ways that were cheap and effective.

Right, it is what you know—"to delude (to dream?)".

For example, "The novels I write will be very popular and I can smile off my face when I earn those royalties!" or "This will become a movie!" or "This will even become a social phenomenon!" or "There will even be a prize with my own novel name!". When I dream such things (only pure delusions!), I will feel "Yeah~! I thrived~!" and a gradually had the push-and-go (sorry for my vulgarity)

.

At the times when I submitted my draft to the new person's award, I was helped much by Mr. Delusion.

From now on I will need more help from him.

Speaking of which, when I submitted my draft, there was only one thing I could do to relieve the tension when my draft was jammed.

Right, it is what you know—thinking of my pen name.

Honestly, I am not so hardheaded when it comes to choosing the pen name, but thinking of what pen name to choose was pleasant and I had come up with different ideas.

After that, though I'm not sure of the reason, when I was about to submit the draft, I thought that "Something that goes like Allan Poe → Edogawa Ranpo kind of pen name would be kinda cool, eh?"

There was not any special reason.

It was only my feeling.

Therefore, I was thinking "Find a person I like or respects; then copy his name to become my pen name!"; then because of this (after all this is to relieve my stress) I considered a few pen names.

Then what happened? I don't know why, but what was on my list was those names of professional wrestlers!

...

Although I know using such names was inappropriate for one having a target as a writer, I thought "I'm not going to immediately become a professional writer anyways, so it doesn't really matter, eh?". Therefore I decided to copy my respected professional wrestler player and came down with this pen name after repeated deliberation.

To be frank, it was an enjoying task.

...But I never thought I would use this pen name...

Ah, actually I didn't have any regret for using this pen name.

Finally...

By the way, I am not a professional wrestler otaku.

If someone like me proclaims to be a 'professional wrestler otaku', they must be too conceited.

I am speaking the truth.

Professional wrestling is so profound.

Ah, you should have no interest in such things, sorry.

So, here comes my word of thanks!

First, are those who are involved in the ENTAME prize in Famitsu Bunko who gave me the opportunity to make my debut. Thank you.

Second, are those who did your best to let this book be published (especially the editor). Thank you.

Third, is Shiromizakana-sensei who drew fantastic illustrations even in her busiest times. Thank you very much.

Lastly, thank you for all of you readers who were willing to pick up and read this book.

If you think this book is good after you read it, I would feel deeply honoured.

January 2010, Sadanatsu Anda.

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おーがとうござ  
ました &  
お、麻様ごはん!

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NINJA



## References

1. ↑ An ordinance-designated city is a city in Japan that is governed by its own law, has a population over 500 thousand, and is appointed by the government. The city has rights over social welfare, public hygiene, and urban planning etc. It has up to 19 legislative criteria. It can also set up its own districts.
2. ↑ Sweeping side punch is a technique in karate that uses fingertips to attack the opponent's throat, abdomen, eyes and etc. body parts. There are four types of sweeping side punch, from using one finger to four fingers.
3. ↑ AV is short for Adult Video.
4. ↑ The Fuusenkazura is a climbing plant with circular, balloon-like fruits. The vine also grows small, clustered white flowers. Other names for it include Heartseed or Balloon Vine.
5. ↑ lesbian
6. ↑ One of many Japanese terms used to refer to an elder brother or elder male cousin or by younger kids to refer to any elder male as a form of respect. Please note that the Japanese language carries

different ways of referring to the same relative, each carrying different levels of affection, respect, etc.  
Therefore this has been left as it is.

7. ↑ Shurabu is ...
8. ↑ A mask used in Noh, which is a classical Japanese musical drama where performers wear masks